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The Choice

Snow swirled in the freezing leaf-bare wind. Leaping joyfully in the cold were three tiny kits.

Bluefur stared at them, nearly overwhelmed by grief. Soon her kits would be gone, living in RiverClan with their father. She had made the plan with Oakheart just a few days earlier at the Gathering. Tonight was the night. Today was the last day her kits would know her as their mother.

How could she go through with it? What if Goosefeather was wrong? According to him she was meant to be the fire that would save ThunderClan. She shook her head to clear it, flicking snow from her ears. Why was she trusting Goosefeather of all cats on the decision that would affect her entire future- and her kits' futures as well.

Looking at them now, she took in their appearances. Stonekit was the biggest, his fur a dark blue-gray. Even though he was young, Bluefur could already see his likeness to Oakheart in the curve of his head and his long powerful limbs.

She turned to Mistykit. Of all her kits, Mistykit resembled her the most. Everything about her- her pelt, her eyes, the way she frowned when her littermates caught her with a surprise pounce- Bluefur knew that she must have looked like that too, long ago.

And Mosskit. Bluefur blinked at her tiniest kit with affection. Her small daughter's fur was pale gray and white. Bluefur often wondered whether Mosskit had inherited her coloration from Oakheart's side or her own. Mosskit often insisted on staying at Bluefur's side, although she had been joining her littermates to play more recently. The tiny she-cat was with them now, trailing a few pawsteps behind them as she tried to push her small frame through the snow.

Bluefur glanced away from her kits, and saw Goosefeather watching

her from across the camp, his pale fur shrouded in the lightly falling snow. Apparently taking her gaze as an invitation to approach, Goosefeather padded up, his pale blue eyes glinting in the reflected light from the icy ground. "Bluefur, you have made your decision. You cannot turn back."

Bluefur's heart fluttered in her chest. How could he know that she had been having second thoughts?

The mews of her kits broke through her reverie. "I can jump higher!"

"No I can!" Mistykit and Stonekit pounced at each other, whipping up small clouds of snow.

Wordlessly, the old medicine cat turned and left, and Bluefur felt a chill spread through her pelt.

She continued to keep an eye on her kits, her mind elsewhere. Would her Clan survive if she wasn't made deputy? Surely the fate of ThunderClan could not rest on a single cat. If it was really StarClan's will for her to be leader, couldn't they have sent her a sign to prevent her from seeing Oakheart in the first place? Bluefur fluffed out her fur, startled by her own thoughts. The ways StarClan worked were a mystery; she shouldn't be questioning them!

But all she had to go off of were the words of Goosefeather, and a single vision of Thistleclaw covered in blood.

Mosskit pounced at a tiny hill of snow, scattering it everywhere, and Bluefur felt a burst of grief. She had learned that from one of the warriors, and if she stayed in ThunderClan she might be able to put that technique to good use. She would learn how to hunt forest prey, not fish from the river.

The more she thought about it the more certain she became: her kits' destinies lay here, not in RiverClan. Stonekit and Mistykit and Mosskit would all become loyal warriors of ThunderClan.

Goosefeather was still staring at Bluefur, and she raised her chin, meeting his distant gaze. *No,* she thought, willing Goosefeather to

understand. *I will not do this.*

A sad look crossed Goosefeather's face. For a moment Bluefur was frozen when her eyes met his; the look turned her blood to ice.

"Alright now, you three," Bluefur meowed hastily, turning away from the former medicine cat. "Stonekit, Mistykit, Mosskit, come here. Time to go inside. It's getting late."

The kits were too tired to protest as Bluefur bundled them into the nursery, and they settled down quickly. Bluefur wrapped her tail around them, pulling them close.

She knew she wasn't going to be able to give them up. How could she have even thought she could make that choice? She looked down tenderly at her sleeping kits, a choked purr rising from her throat. "I will never leave you," she whispered. "I promise."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting." Nearly a moon after she had made her choice, Bluefur looked up at Sunstar's call. Noticing Tawnyspots sitting next to the Highrock, she felt as though a stone had dropped into her belly. This was it- Sunstar was going to appoint a new deputy. It hadn't felt real until now that she would never get the chance to lead her Clan. Bluefur unsheathed her claws when she realized that Thistleclaw was sitting beside Tawnyspots. It was clear what Sunstar's decision would be.

Mistykit, Stonekit, and Mosskit were tussling a few tail-lengths away, oblivious of the importance of the ceremony about to take place.

"Come here, kits." Bluefur beckoned them with her tail.

Mosskit opened her mouth to protest, but Bluefur shot them a warning glance, and they shuffled back to her side.

"This is an important day for ThunderClan," Bluefur told them, ignoring the pang of sadness that coursed through her pelt. "See there?" She pointed with her tail, giving her kits a moment to turn

their heads. "That's Tawnyspots. He's retiring from his position as Clan deputy today." Her kits watched the tom with curious blue eyes, reminding Bluefur of her own first introduction to the Clan.

"Why?" asked Mosskit.

"Tawnyspots has been a warrior for a very long time." Bluefur gave Mosskit a swift lick. "It's time for a younger cat to be deputy now."

Bluefur was preparing herself for another stream of 'why?'s' from Mosskit, when Stonekit spoke up. "When the new deputy retires, who gets to be deputy then?"

"The Clan leader decides," Bluefur explained.

Stonekit's tail was flicking excitedly. "Can I be deputy?"

"No fair, I wanted to be deputy!" Mistykit wailed.

Bluefur sighed. "You two won't be old enough for a long time."

Mosskit prodded Bluefur's side with a tiny forepaw. "I want to be deputy too!"

"That will be up to the Clan leader." Bluefur felt an ache in her belly. By the time her kits were old enough to make deputy, *she* would probably have been their leader... if only she had made a different choice. Bluefur shook her head to clear it. She wouldn't have known her kits at all if she had given them up. It was better this way.

Once all the cats had gathered, Sunstar began. "For many moons, Tawnyspots has been the trusted deputy of ThunderClan. But even good things must come to an end." Cats were nodding slowly in acceptance; it had been clear for seasons that Tawnyspots was becoming too old to serve as deputy. "I am sad to announce that Tawnyspots has decided to retire to the elders' den," Sunstar continued. "We hope that he will continue to share his wisdom and advice with our Clan for many moons to come."

The crowd broke into raucous cheers. "Tawnyspots! Tawnyspots!" The small spotted tom dipped his head modestly, clearly pleased at

the support from his Clan.

"And now," Sunstar announced, "it is time to name a new deputy. I say these words before StarClan so that the spirits of our ancestors may hear and approve my choice." He paused, and the camp seemed to hold its breath in anticipation. "Thistleclaw will be the new deputy of ThunderClan."

Yowls erupted from the clearing, spiraling into the clear morning sky. "Thistleclaw! Thistleclaw! Thistleclaw!" Bluefur reluctantly joined in, warily observing her rival.

"Oh, Windflight!" Poppydawn meowed, pressing her fur against her mate's side. "Our son has been made deputy!"

"We were blessed with wonderful kits," Windflight replied, twining his tail with Poppydawn's, his eyes glowing as they watched his son walk forward to accept the appointment.

Thistleclaw swept his gaze over his Clanmates, his chin raised as he took in their cheers. The cats quieted down as they realized that he wanted to speak. "ThunderClan, I promise you that I will use this position to make our Clan greater than it has ever been before. ThunderClan will be strong- a force that no cat will challenge, Clan cat or rogue."

More chanting followed his speech. "Thistleclaw! Thistleclaw!" Bluefur caught Sunstar's gaze. He was staring down at his deputy with a look of approval on his face. Bluefur turned around, confused. She couldn't be the only one concerned about Thistleclaw's appointment, could she?

But she saw no other cat with reservations. Tigerclaw's tail was flicking with excitement for his former mentor. Redpaw and Willowpaw had both reared up on their hind legs, and were enthusiastically calling out their new deputy's name, while Whitestorm had begun to pad up to congratulate his father. Stormtail and Adderfang were nodding in agreement, although Bluefur knew that they both could have expected to be made deputy themselves.

With a jolt she noticed Goosefeather sitting at the edge of the clearing, his pelt unkempt as usual. The old pale gray tom's eyes were fixed on her; there was an edge of grief in his pale blue gaze.

Bluefur looked away, and turned to her kits to reassure herself. They had left her side by now. Mosskit was weaving through the crowd around the legs of the warriors, with Mistykit and Stonekit close behind. Watching her kits chase each other, she knew with certainty that she hadn't made the wrong choice. But why then was her pelt prickling with apprehension?

Kithood

"Mosskit, stop harassing your brother," Bluefur scolded, lashing her tail.

"He started it!"

"Did not!"

"He did too!"

"No, I didn't!" Stonekit objected.

Bluefur made her voice as stern as she could. "Stop fighting, both of you."

"But he started it!" Mosskit turned to her mother. "He swatted me first!"

"No I didn-"

"Keep arguing and you won't get to see Runningkit's and Mousekit's apprentice ceremony," Bluefur growled, and with that there was silence.

Bluefur thought that she was finally going to get a little peace and quiet when Mistykit suddenly pounced on top of Stonekit from out of nowhere, squashing him. The young tom let out a wail. Bluefur rounded on Mistykit, fixing her with a stern glare. "I was just playing," Mistykit protested. "It's not my fault he didn't move!"

Bluefur sighed. Her kits were certainly a pawful. In the moons that followed Thistleclaw's appointment as Clan deputy, life went on. Since leaf-bare had released its cruel grip on the forest, her kits had grown, although they still weren't as big as normal three moon old kits should be. Bluefur shoved back a pang of guilt. Although it wasn't her fault she hadn't been able to produce enough milk, those prey-poor moons in her kits' early life had made them small, and

now that prey was running again, they still hadn't quite reached the size they should have been for their age. Featherwhisker reassured her that in another moon or two they would catch up to where they should be.

They were starting to develop their own individual personalities- as much as kits could, anyway. Stonekit was the serious one, Mistykit was perceptive, and Mosskit could be timid at times and a rambunctious troublemaker at others.

Bluefur often wondered if Oakheart was thinking of them. She hadn't been to a Gathering since the night she had told Oakheart she would bring their kits to him. *Does he understand why I didn't come?* She thought of him waiting alone, among the snow swept stones of Sunningrocks, for the kits he would never see.

Soon she heard the sound of Sunstar's voice calling the summons for the meeting. Herding her kits to a good spot in the clearing, Bluefur settled herself next to Whitestorm. Thrushpelt soon joined them, and the kits let out excited squeaks when the sandy brown tom arrived.

"Thrushpelt!" With a squeal Mosskit leaped onto Thrushpelt's back, which earned her a severe look from Bluefur.

"Not now, Mosskit," Thrushpelt chided her lightly. "The ceremony is about to start."

"Oh, right." Mosskit scrambled off his back and settled herself next to him, sitting up as straight as she could. Bluefur's whiskers twitched as she shared an amused glance with Thrushpelt.

The camp grew silent as Runningkit and Mousekit padded up to the Highrock, followed closely by their mother, White-eye, who sat down beside them.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Sunstar called. "It is time for White-eye's kits receive their apprentice names. Come forward, you two."

"Look, it's Runningkit!" Mosskit exclaimed as the brown tom was called up first.

Stonekit piped up, his high pitched mew echoing throughout the camp. "I wonder what his apprentice name will be." Bluefur directed a quietening hiss at her kits as the Clan mrrowed in amusement.

She could still hear Mistykit's much softer mew to her littermates. "Runningpaw, I bet."

The kits fidgeted throughout the ceremony, and afterward they crowded around Thrushpelt. Meeting Bluefur's gaze with a mischievous glow in his eyes, Thrushpelt let out a mock growl and fluffed out his pelt.

Bluefur was mortified that her kits had disrupted the beginning of the apprentice ceremony, but the clearing was so cheerful that she had a hard time being angry with them. *This is how it should be,* she realized, watching her three kits launch a joint attack on Thrushpelt. *How could I have ever thought of giving them up?*

More moons passed. Redtail and Willowpelt earned their warrior names, and Spottedpaw became Spottedleaf shortly after that. Bluefur had attended several Gatherings now since the birth of her kits, although she hadn't had the chance to speak to Oakheart there, and she wasn't entirely sure if she should anyway.

Bluefur was often brought back to the memory when all three of them had proclaimed that they wanted to be deputy. Stonekit seemed most likely to earn that title; he took the fact that they would soon be apprentices very seriously. It seemed like so long ago, with all the trouble her kits had gotten into in the meantime.

Like the time they had left the camp to hunt by themselves. Bluefur had been beside herself with worry until a patrol had found them at Snakerocks. Mosskit hadn't left her side for three days after the scolding they'd received; even Mistykit and Stonekit had been shaken. It hadn't hurt to emphasize that a snake could swallow a kit whole either.

Now though, her kits were growing up. Sunstar had just informed Bluefur that her kits' apprentice ceremony would be today, and now

she was struggling to give Stonekit a good wash.

The blue-gray kit flailed, trying to escape, but it was hopeless. "Stop it, Bluefur! I'm six moons old; I can't have my mother grooming me!"

But Bluefur was in no mood to negotiate, the importance of the ceremony overweighing everything else. Her son couldn't show up to his apprentice ceremony looking like a ruffian! "You need to look your best," she replied between licks. "You're presenting yourself to the whole Clan."

"Why don't you ever clean Mosskit or Mistykit?" he asked sullenly.

Mistykit sniffed. "Maybe because *we* already do it ourselves."

Stonekit made a face at his sisters. Mosskit playfully batted him with a tiny paw. Even though many moons had passed, she was still the smallest in her litter. Bluefur hoped she would be able to keep up with her siblings during their training.

"I wonder who our mentors will be," Mosskit mewed thoughtfully.

Stonekit relaxed, having accepted that Bluefur was going to groom him. "I hope I get Thrushpelt."

"Thrushpelt can't be our mentor!" Mistykit exclaimed.

Stonekit scowled. "Why?"

"Because," Mistykit meowed, looking annoyed at Stonekit's obliviousness. She frowned, and Bluefur knew what her daughter wanted to say: *He's our father.* Bluefur felt the familiar pang of guilt at the unspoken words. Although the Clan had assumed that Thrushpelt was the kits' father, Bluefur had never confirmed it, even to her kits, and avoided the subject like it was crow-food. Bluefur didn't correct her kits when they referred to Thrushpelt as their father, and the few times they had asked about it directly, she only told them that Thrushpelt loved them very much and wanted what was best for them.

And he did- that was true. Thrushpelt loved them like they were his

own.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting." Sunstar's summons echoed through the camp.

"This is it!" Stonekit squealed, forgetting his initial anger. He rolled from his side and up to his paws, bristling with excitement. He shook the dust out of his fur, and somehow the serious gleam in his eyes made him look older. Stonekit padded toward the foot of the Highrock, with Mistykit close behind. But Mosskit was still standing next to Bluefur.

"We- we'll still talk and everything, right?" her smallest daughter mewed, her eyes glimmering with worry.

Bluefur gave Mosskit a swift lick between the ears. "Of course we will," she reassured her. "I want to hear all about your training."

Mosskit nodded earnestly. "I'll tell you about it every day. I promise."

Cats were beginning to gather around the foot of the Highrock. "Go on." Bluefur nudged her daughter's shoulder. "I'll join you in a moment."

With one last glance filled with a mixture of anxiety and enthusiasm, Mosskit trotted into the crowd to join her siblings. Bluefur followed more slowly, making her way to the front of the group to settle herself a short way off from her kits. She caught Mosskit's eye, and nodded her reassurances as Sunstar began the ceremony.

"Mistykit, step forward." The blue-gray she-cat complied, looking up at the ThunderClan leader with a look of determination in her eyes. "Mistykit, from this moment until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Mistypaw." Sunstar glanced around the clearing, his eyes settling on one of the warriors. "Patchpelt," he meowed. "You will mentor Mistypaw. You received your training from Fuzzypelt, and you did an excellent job mentoring Whitestorm. Pass your skills on to this apprentice as well."

Patchpelt nodded solemnly and stepped forward to touch noses. Bluefur found herself nodding approvingly, pleased by Sunstar's choice.

Sunstar flicked his tail, beckoning the next kit forward. "Stonekit." The dark gray tom took a step closer to the Highrock. "Until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Stonepaw." The newly named Stonepaw seemed to expand with pride. "Lionheart, you will be Stonepaw's mentor. You are ready for your first apprentice, and I expect you to pass on all that you know to him." Stonepaw evenly met Lionheart's gaze as they formally touched noses.

Shifting her paws, Bluefur looked at Mosskit, who was now standing alone. Who would Sunstar choose to mentor her?

"Mosskit, from this day forward until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Mosspaw." Bluefur blinked. Sunstar was hesitating. He finally called out a name. "Sparrowpelt, you will mentor Mosspaw. Your skills have served our Clan well for many seasons. You already trained one great warrior and although she is no longer with us, she was a credit to you." *Snowfur,* Bluefur realized, feeling a pang of sadness that her sister would never get the chance to meet her kits. "I expect you can do it again with this apprentice," Sunstar finished.

Sparrowpelt lifted his head high, eyes gleaming, and stepped forward. Mosspaw readily touched her nose to her new mentor's, and the two cats padded over to join the other mentor-apprentice pairs.

"Mosspaw! Stonepaw! Mistypaw!" Bluefur raised her voice along with the rest of her Clanmates. She turned to Thrushpelt, a purr rising in her throat. She was very happy with all her kits' mentors, and Sunstar's mention of Snowfur had touched her greatly.

"I couldn't have hoped for better," Bluefur meowed. She lowered her voice to whisper in Thrushpelt's ear. "I was worried one of them was going to get Thistleclaw."

Rosetail appeared beside her. "What would be so bad about that?"

Bluefur nearly leaped out of her fur. Although her dislike of Thistleclaw wasn't a secret, she knew it wouldn't gain her any friends if she was openly badmouthing the Clan deputy. "Come on, Rosetail, did you have to sneak up on me like that?"

"And?" Tail flicking from side to side, Rosetail tilted her head, and Bluefur knew that the she-cat might use her comment as fuel for gossip.

"Everyone knows Thistleclaw and I don't get along. That's not really news." Shifting her paws, Bluefur glanced away.

"He is Clan deputy," Rosetail pointed out. "It would have been an honor for one of your kits to be mentored by him."

Bluefur felt the fur on the back of her neck rising. Thrushpelt seemed to notice it too, and brushed her flank with his tail to steer her away from an argument. "Look at them, they're already starting their training."

It was true. Mosspaw had started a nervous conversation with Sparrowpelt. The tom was mewing something, and Bluefur could hear the friendly tone of his voice even from across the camp.

Stonepaw's whiskers were twitching in amusement; it seemed that he was already getting along well with his mentor. Mistypaw was asking Patchpelt a question, and the black-and-white tom nodded patiently.

As though a silent signal had been given, Sparrowpelt, Patchpelt, and Lionheart padded one by one into the gorse tunnel, with Bluefur's three kits racing after them. Mistypaw and Stonepaw bounded through first, but before Mosspaw entered the tunnel she turned back, her eyes wide and anxious. Bluefur blinked encouragingly, and felt her fur warm when the anxiety in her daughter's eyes was replaced with resolve.

After Mosspaw's light gray tail had disappeared into the gorse tunnel, Bluefur turned her attention back to the rest of the clearing. Rosetail was now talking to Goldenflower and Swiftbreeze, their heads close together. Bluefur sighed. Even though Rosetail was

Thistleclaw's sister, Bluefur wished the ginger she-cat wouldn't gossip about her words. The Clan was going to think she had openly declared herself Thistleclaw's mortal enemy by the time the news got around.

Apprenticeship

With her kits out of the nursery, Bluefur was finally able to move back to the warriors' den. She reclaimed her old nest the same day her kits became apprentices.

Although Bluefur loved her kits, she was overjoyed to be a warrior again. The patrols, the hunting, the togetherness with her Clan- they were things she had missed greatly.

Sometimes she thought about what could have been. If she had made a different choice, she would have been deputy. Instead she was taking orders from her enemy. Thistleclaw seemed to delight in that; he strode around the camp like it belonged to him, and Bluefur supposed that in a way, it did. She tried not to let Thistleclaw's arrogance bother her, and most of the time succeeded. Even though she knew she would never become ThunderClan's leader, she did have her kits. They knew Bluefur as their mother, not an enemy warrior, and she told herself that meant more than any feeling leadership could bring.

Mosspaw, Mistypaw, and Stonepaw's apprenticeships were uneventful for the most part. Although they no longer lived with her, Bluefur tried to involve herself in their training as much as she could without being overbearing, remembering how she had wished for her own mother's help as an apprentice. She kept track of them from a distance, hearing about their progress from their mentors or the kits themselves in the times that they spoke with her.

Mosspaw was the best of the three in terms of keeping Bluefur informed, although Stonepaw and Mistypaw were by no means detached.

One time early on in their training, she had gotten the chance to patrol with all three of her kits. They had padded along the stream, and Bluefur had picked up a faint prey scent. She ordered her kits to race ahead to flush them out.

"Quick, Stonepaw, that way! Mistypaw circle around back! Mosspaw, take the other side!"

"I don't smell anything," Stonepaw meowed, peering through the trees in confusion.

"There's a vole nest, Stonepaw, now go or you'll miss them!" With that, Stonepaw shot off and sure enough, he returned with a vole.

"How did you know that?" Stonepaw dropped the vole on the ground.

"Yeah, I couldn't tell anything was there until the vole started running away from us," Mosspaw added.

Bluefur shook her head. "The scent was in the breeze. You'll get better at tracking with more experience. Come on; let's try again further down. Mosspaw, why don't you try to make the catch this time."

They had caught three more voles and a squirrel that way. Her kits had been impressed; they hadn't scented the prey at all and thought Bluefur had a sixth sense.

That was one of the only times Bluefur had been able to patrol with her kits, and she knew that their wide-eyed wonder at the volume of prey they managed to catch would remain one of her favorite memories.

One day several moons into her kits apprenticeships, Bluefur decided to take a walk in the forest. She had taken the dawn patrol, so she was done with her required warrior duties for the day.

Padding aimlessly, Bluefur passed the training hollow. "Good job, Mistypaw." Bluefur's ears twitched. That was Patchpelt. "Now, when you're using that move in battle you'll need to be quicker, but that's a fine start."

Bluefur heard the sound of rustling leaves. "Can I try against Stonepaw or Mosspaw?" asked Mistypaw.

"Once their mentors have finished teaching them, I don't see why not," Patchpelt told her. "But for now keep practicing. You want to beat them, don't you?"

There was silence; Bluefur guessed that Mistypaw had nodded. She walked farther.

"Swipe like this, Stonepaw," Lionheart was mewing. "Yes, that's it." Curiosity getting the better of her, Bluefur scooted to the edge of the clearing, settling herself into a hidden spot that allowed her to view the training session without gaining notice.

Eyes narrowed seriously, Stonepaw reared up on his hind legs, reaching out with a forepaw. Then he fell back onto all four paws. "How was that?"

Lionheart gave him a satisfied nod. "Excellent." He glanced over at Patchpelt, who was demonstrating a pouncing move to Mistypaw. Swiveling her head, Bluefur wondered if her kits' mentors would have them face off. She was curious as to how her kits might handle a fight.

In the opposite corner from Mistypaw and Stonepaw, Sparrowpelt was standing with Mosspaw. They crouched facing each other, about to practice a mock battle. Bluefur craned her neck to watch. How would her daughter fare against one of ThunderClan's senior warriors? Mosspaw crouched, wriggling her haunches. She was just about to leap when-

"Bluefur?" hissed a cat's voice. Bluefur spun around to see Thrushpelt facing her. "What are you doing here?"

It took her a moment to get her voice back. "I was just hunting," she replied. "And . . . I overheard the kits' training and wanted to see how they were doing." Her ears burned. She must look like one of those busybody mothers, spying on her kits' warrior training sessions. *Come on Bluefur,* she mewed to herself. *You're better than that.*

Thrushpelt watched her, and Bluefur's pelt prickled uncomfortably. "So, how are they?"

"They're doing well, as far as I can see." Bluefur paused, avoiding Thrushpelt's gaze. "Stonepaw's getting quite good at the up claw-swipe."

They were silent for a moment. Thrushpelt turned to Bluefur, seeming to be able to tell she was thinking about something. "What is it?"

"It's just- I want them to be the best warriors they can be. For ThunderClan." She stopped, hesitating, and Thrushpelt nodded, patiently waiting for her to continue. "I gave up so much for them," she confessed. "I want ThunderClan to be better for it." Bluefur shook her head to clear it.

Thrushpelt flicked his tail to draw her away. "Come on, let's go hunt."

Bluefur nodded, allowing herself to be led away. Her kits would be fine. ThunderClan was strong.

Around sunhigh one day about three moons into the kits' apprenticeships, Mosspaw returned to camp after a morning of training, her eyes glittering mischievously. She practically bounced over to Bluefur.

"Guess what?" she meowed. She didn't wait for Bluefur to answer before she continued. "I beat Runningpaw!"

Bluefur blinked, confused, but couldn't help but share her kit's enthusiasm. "Beat him at what?"

"A mock battle! And he's almost a warrior too!" Mosspaw kneaded her paws into the ground, seemingly unable to contain her energy. "Right, Whitestorm? Wasn't it great?" Turning her head, Bluefur saw her sister's son pad up at the mention of his name.

"It was impressive," Whitestorm admitted.

"Although I beat her a moment later!" called Stonepaw. Bluefur squinted, making out the shape of the blue-gray apprentice

bounding through the gorse tunnel. Stonepaw loped over to his sister, his eyes uncharacteristically playful.

"No, that didn't count. You cheated," Mosspaw mewed, wrapping her tail around her paws.

Stonepaw flicked his ears. "Keep telling yourself that. There's no rule against feinting and *then* attacking."

Mistypaw must have heard the commotion, and she poked her head out of the elder's den. "What is it you two are yowling about?" Shaking moss from her paws, she padded over to the group. "Did one of you catch a pheasant or something?"

"I won a fight against Mosspaw," Stonepaw told her.

"With a cheap trick," Mosspaw protested.

"I'll show you a cheap trick!" Stonepaw pounced, and soon he and Mosspaw were scuffling on the ground. Sighing, Bluefur shook her head and shared a glance with Whitestorm. She and Snowfur hadn't been like that when they were apprentices, had they? Stonepaw, Mistypaw, and Mosspaw always seemed so full of energy.

Suddenly Thistleclaw burst into the camp, followed by Tigerclaw, Windflight and Goldenflower. He padded across the camp to the Highrock, where Sunstar was resting, and Bluefur could pick out the words 'ShadowClan' and 'trespassing'. Leaving her kits to bicker good naturedly amongst themselves, Bluefur moved closer, and she could hear Thistleclaw telling Sunstar that the scent of ShadowClan had been detected on the ThunderClan side of the Thunderpath.

"We must attack," he finished. "We cannot tolerate their disrespect for our borders. They need to be taught a lesson!"

Sunstar calmly waved his tail to quiet him. "Not so fast, Thistleclaw. One cat is hardly an invasion. Up our border patrols in the area, but for now we shall wait and see. We can respond at the next Gathering."

Although his ears were flat, Thistleclaw nodded stiffly in respect for his Clan leader's wishes. "Yes, Sunstar," he meowed. "I will organize

the additional patrols right away."

As Thistleclaw began to walk away, Bluefur abruptly sensed another cat's presence, and whipped around. Pelt ruffled and dirty, Goosefeather was muttering to himself at the center of the clearing; apparently he had observed the exchange between ThunderClan's leader and deputy as well. Thistleclaw walked back to the warriors' den, eyeing Goosefeather with a look of disgust. The former medicine cat turned to Bluefur, and she couldn't help but shudder when she met his eyes.

The Gathering

The night of the Gathering was clear. Leaf-fall had arrived in earnest now, turning the trees into a patchwork of brown, red, and orange.

Bluefur stood near the head of the patrol, Whitestorm at her shoulder. Mistypaw, Mosspaw, and Stonepaw were a short distance away, their tails flicking impatiently. This would be their first Gathering, and Bluefur could hear their excited mews, although she couldn't make out the words.

"I bet they'll make some friends tonight," Whitestorm meowed. "There are quite a few apprentices in the other Clans right now."

"Hopefully they don't reveal too many ThunderClan secrets," Bluefur mewed teasingly.

Stonepaw's head swiveled in Bluefur's direction. "Hey! We heard that!"

Stifling a purr, Bluefur was about to respond when Sunstar gave the signal to enter Fourtrees. The ThunderClan cats bounded down into the clearing, and in the chaos Bluefur found herself in the center of the crowd, next to her kits.

"Who should we talk to?" Mistypaw raised herself to her full height, trying to look over the heads of the gathered cats.

The three apprentices huddled together, watching the fierce cats loping around them. Mosspaw was staring at an intimidating ShadowClan tom. "As long as it's not him I think we'll be okay."

"There's a group of apprentices over there," Bluefur suggested, pointing toward a cluster of WindClan cats. "Why don't you go talk to them?"

But her kits hadn't taken three pawsteps before a cat approached her from behind. "Hello, Bluefur." She slowly turned toward the achingly familiar mew.

Bluefur had trouble finding her voice for a heartbeat. "Oakheart," she meowed, dipping her head.

"I see you are doing well."

"I am. Leaf-fall has been kind to ThunderClan this year."

Oakheart nodded. "Prey is also running well in RiverClan."

Mosspaw, Mistypaw, and Stonepaw watched the exchange curiously. It was obvious that they were expecting an introduction. "Mosspaw, Mistypaw, Stonepaw, this is Oakheart." Taking a deep breath, she turned to her former mate. "Oakheart these are my kits"- *Our kits,* she thought, nearly overwhelmed with despair- "Mistypaw, Stonepaw, and Mosspaw." She pointed them out by name with her tail, and she could almost see the thoughts flickering behind Oakheart's green eyes as he rested his gaze on each of them.

Mosspaw broke the silence. "Hi."

"Hello there, Mosspaw," Oakheart choked. "Mistypaw, Stonepaw." He watched them, seeming to be at a loss for words for once. The three of them watched Oakheart, their inquisitive eyes never leaving him. "I'm glad to finally meet you."

"Us?" asked Mosspaw.

"Of course," Oakheart told her. "I was at the Gathering when your birth was announced, and knowing Bluefur was your mother I wanted to see how you were turning out."

"So you're of RiverClan," Stonepaw began conversationally. "How do you know our mother anyway?" Bluefur knew it was an innocent question, but she had to consciously prevent herself from bristling.

But Oakheart's answer was smooth. "We met at a Gathering a few leaf-bares ago. I've been a burr in her side ever since." Oakheart shot Bluefur a teasing glance, and she looked away.

Mistypaw tilted her head. "Do you only hunt fish?"

"Mostly, but there's nothing stopping us from catching forest prey now and again."

Mistypaw frowned thoughtfully. "Are there different types of fish like there are different types of forest prey?"

Oakheart nodded enthusiastically. "There are so many, you wouldn't believe it. Minnows, carp, trout, pike- some pike are huge, even bigger than foxes. In fact, I was out on patrol by the river the other day, and we found one that was at least four cat-lengths long."

"No way," Stonepaw whispered.

"It's true, I swear it." The three apprentices' eyes grew round as he continued, telling them a story about catching a pike that Bluefur thought was most likely exaggerated.

"I caught three squirrels yesterday," Mosspaw bragged when he'd finished.

Oakheart nodded warmly. "What I would expect, with Bluefur as your mother. She's a fine hunter as well."

Mosspaw was eating up the praise, but next to her Mistypaw's tail was twitching. "How would you know that?"

"Really? With all her boasting, every cat knows."

Bluefur scoffed. "Like you're one to talk," she mewed fondly.

Oakheart flicked his tail. "It's not boasting if it's the truth."

Bluefur wondered if her kits could see the emotion in their eyes. They didn't seem to think that there was anything unusual about Oakheart's praise.

A loud yowl rang out, signaling that it was time for the Clan leaders to make their announcements. Bluefur and Oakheart turned to look at the Great Rock. Stonepaw, Mistypaw, and Mosspaw settled themselves between them.

Sunstar was the first to speak. "We have two new warriors this moon, Runningwind and Mousefur." The hollow filled with noise as cats cheered the newly named warriors. Bluefur could see them now, their chests puffed out with pride.

Sunstar allowed the chanting to die down before he kept going, his tone much more serious than before. "ThunderClan has other news as well. Recently, a patrol scented ShadowClan on the wrong side of the border." Disturbed murmurs broke out, with a few ShadowClan cats yowling their dissent. "If such trespassing continues, know that ThunderClan will not hesitate to protect itself."

ShadowClan's leader, Raggedstar, drew himself up to his full height. "I was wondering if you would bring that up. Several of our apprentices accidentally found themselves on the border of ThunderClan's hunting grounds. They were dealt with, and I can assure you that this will not be an issue going forward."

Bluefur noted that he hadn't admitted to trespassing, just to being close to the border. The ShadowClan cats shifted awkwardly on their paws, and Bluefur wondered if Raggedstar had been entirely truthful.

And she hadn't been the only one who noticed. Thistleclaw and Tigerclaw were huddled together, mewing something to each other. "Traitorous scum," Thistleclaw growled. "When I'm leader, I won't stand for such insolence. No cat will make a mockery of ThunderClan."

As Tigerclaw dug his massive claws into the ground, a wave of foreboding coursed through Bluefur's pelt.

On the way back from the Gathering, Mistypaw, Stonepaw, and Mosspaw were chattering excitedly. Mosspaw was the most enthusiastic of all. "Can you believe it?" she mewed, her tail waving from one side to the other. "We met a RiverClan warrior!"

"I had no idea there were so many types of fish." Mistypaw's tail twitched.

"I know, right?" The look on Stonepaw's face was one of wonder. "Can you imagine staring into the river, and suddenly a fox sized fish leaps out at you?" Stonepaw looked up. "I didn't know you were friends with a RiverClan cat, Bluefur. Why didn't you tell us about him before?"

Heart heavy, Bluefur shook her head. "I wouldn't call him a friend."

"Because we can't be friends with enemy warriors, right?" Tail flicking, Mistypaw gave Bluefur a questioning glance.

"No," Bluefur meowed, closing her eyes. "We can't."

Stonepaw shot a challenging look at his sisters. "Race you to the stream." Without another word, Mistypaw bounded ahead of him. "No fair!" Stonepaw yowled, scrambling to catch up.

As Stonepaw and Mistypaw sprinted away, Mosspaw stayed behind. "Bluefur, can I ask you something?" she began, seeming unsure of herself. "*Why*? Why *can't* we be friends with cats from other Clans? Oakheart seemed nice enough. It was almost like talking to a ThunderClan cat."

Bluefur sighed. "It's important to be at least cordial at Gatherings."

"So you don't care about Oakheart at all?" Bluefur flinched; even though her daughter had no malice in her voice, her words still cut Bluefur to her core. *StarClan, this is hard.*

"I... I respect him as much as I do any warrior from outside ThunderClan."

"I just don't see *why* we do this. There's nothing stopping us from being friends. We're all just cats."

If only it were that simple, Bluefur thought. Aloud she mewed: "True, but remember, one day you'll meet the cats you've talked to at Gatherings in battle." Bluefur shuddered. What if her kits had to face their father in battle one day? If one of them attacked Oakheart, would he fight back? "You must always remember that your first loyalty is to ThunderClan, and no one else."

They walked in silence for a long time, and Bluefur noticed that Mosspaw's blue eyes were narrowed in concentration. Finally, the gray and white apprentice broke the silence. "I think I understand." Gaining a spring in her step, Mosspaw quickened her pace. "I'm going to catch up with Mistypaw and Stonepaw. We were going to tell Thrushpelt all about everything that happened at our first Gathering." She shot off.

As Mosspaw disappeared into the undergrowth, Bluefur's own words rang in her ears. *You must always remember that your first loyalty is to ThunderClan, and no one else.*

Bluefur didn't regret her kits, but she hoped they wouldn't make her same mistake.

Uncertain Futures

A layer of snow covered the ground as Sunstar's voice rang clearly from the Highrock. "Mosspaw, from this moment you will be known as Mosstail. StarClan honors your intelligence and bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Mosstail was visibly trembling as she gave Sunstar's shoulder a respectful lick.

"Mistyfur! Stoneclaw! Mosstail!"

Bluefur's heart ached with pride. Her kits were finally warriors.

Much had changed in the Clan in the last few moons. Willowpelt had recently given birth to a litter of kits, much to the relief of the rest of the Clan even if it was leaf-bare. Now that Bluefur's kits were warriors, there were no apprentices, and ThunderClan would not be gaining any new ones for quite some time.

The cold had also brought sickness; Goosefeather, whose health had been declining for seasons, had become weak in the last moon. Leaf-bare was a difficult time for ThunderClan, as always, but new warriors being made filled Bluefur with hope.

She padded up to her kits, too overcome with emotion to speak. If she had given them up she would never have seen this day, and she thanked StarClan she had made the right choice.

Thrushpelt appeared at her shoulder. "Congratulations." He rested his tail on Mistyfur's shoulder. "All three of you."

"We couldn't have done it without you," Mistyfur meowed. "Either of you," she added, dipping her head to Bluefur. "I would never have figured out that rabbit stalking technique if you hadn't helped."

"And I couldn't have hoped for a better mentor." Mosstail stared past the group, giving her mentor a warm blink.

At Mosstail's mew, Sparrowpelt padded up, his eyes gleaming as he gave his apprentice a friendly nudge. "You will sit vigil tonight in the tradition of our ancestors."

"While the rest of us get a good night's sleep," Bluefur added, flicking her tail against Stoneclaw's flank.

"Yes, Sparrowpelt." Stoneclaw paused. "I can't believe we're finally warriors. I've been anticipating keeping vigil for seasons."

"I'm not looking forward to the cold tonight though," Mosstail meowed with a shiver.

Lionheart and Patchpelt joined the newly named warriors as well, and Bluefur and Thrushpelt began to make their way toward the warriors' den. Cats were mewing excitedly all around them and the exuberant mood within the clearing was infectious. The only cat that didn't seem overjoyed was Thistleclaw, but even he looked satisfied that new warriors had been made. Bluefur wished every day could be like this.

As they walked, Thrushpelt touched his nose to Bluefur's ear. "Did you see him?"

"Who?" Bluefur meowed.

"Look." Thrushpelt subtly jerked his head toward the medicine den. "Goosefeather actually came out of his den to watch the ceremony."

Breaking out of her reverie, Bluefur whirled around in surprise. The old tom was ill and hadn't been outside of the medicine den in days, but yet here he was witnessing her kits' warrior ceremonies. There was a wild, crazed expression in his eyes, and when Bluefur looked at him, he shuffled back into the medicine den.

"He was looking at you." Thrushpelt's mew was mild.

Shifting her paws, she looked away. She had no desire to speak with Goosefeather. At this point he would probably start spouting

prophecies no cat could understand. Bluefur scowled, the tiny doubts she always held at the back of her mind rising up again, and she decided she didn't want to be cooped up in the warriors' den for the night just yet. "You go ahead," she meowed, settling herself in one of the last patches of sunlight. "I'll join you in a bit."

Thrushpelt nodded, and Bluefur almost thought she saw disappointment flash across his green eyes before he made his way into the warriors' den. She couldn't help feeling guilty. As much as she cared about Thrushpelt, she knew she would never see him as more than a friend even when most of the Clan thought they were mates.

Later that night after the excitement of the ceremony had died down, Sunstar padded over to Bluefur and dipped his head in greeting. "Bluefur."

"Sunstar." Bluefur narrowed her eyes. The expression on his face was very familiar- it was his typical one in the times he had admonished her about serving her Clan after the deaths of her mother and sister.

"Have you heard about Goosefeather?" he asked. Bluefur nodded. "You should go see him. He's been asking for you."

Bluefur opened her mouth to protest, and then shut it. She had been avoiding Goosefeather for seasons out of guilt. What would she have to say to him now?

Sunstar searched her gaze. "You don't still blame him for Moonflower, do you?"

Bluefur shook her head quickly. *That's not it at all.* "No, Sunstar."

Sighing, the ginger pelted leader turned to face her seriously. "I can't force you to do anything, but it would mean a lot to him if you'd visit. He's taken a turn for the worse." Bluefur inhaled sharply. "I know you haven't had the best relationship with him, but please think about it."

"Yes, Sunstar," Bluefur replied automatically. She knew she should

visit Goosefeather, but his demented appearance after her kits' naming made her nervous. He was probably incoherent at this point; she didn't know what any cat could gain by talking to him.

Sunstar hadn't taken more than a few steps before turning back. "And by the way, I'd watch out for that Stoneclaw. If you aren't careful he's going to start outhunting you one of these days."

Bluefur playfully narrowed her eyes at her former mentor. "Outhunt *me*? Never."

"He did catch a pheasant during his warrior assessment." Sunstar purred, resting his eyes on Mosstail, Stoneclaw, and Mistyfur, who were sitting by the Highrock, their vigil underway. "There was a time I thought you would take a different path, but now I'm glad. Your kits are great warriors, a credit both to you and to ThunderClan."

Bluefur was startled by her leader's sudden praise and it took her a moment to find her voice. "Thank you, Sunstar."

The ginger tom sighed. "With new warriors, even though it is leaf-bare, we are doing better than I could have hoped." Bluefur cast a curious glance at the ThunderClan leader. He was right; prey was nowhere near as poor as last leaf-bare, even if the territory wasn't prey rich. But she sensed he was trying to say something else. "Future seasons won't always be this easy, that is true," Sunstar continued, "but ThunderClan can survive whatever challenges we face."

Bluefur nodded, the anxiety she didn't know she was holding in her chest lifting away. She wondered how many lives Sunstar had left; perhaps that was why he was so concerned about seasons yet to come. But his words reassured her. Although Goosefeather was a medicine cat, Sunstar was a Clan leader, so surely StarClan would have warned him if ThunderClan was in danger of meeting a terrible fate. Goosefeather had probably just imagined the prophecy, or misinterpreted it. He had done that before.

"Well, I'm going to head to the warriors' den for the night." Bluefur stood up. "I should make use of having a night off from the watch

and get some sleep."

"Goodnight," Sunstar meowed, blinking warmly. "And think about what I said."

Bluefur flicked her ears. "I will."

The next day when Bluefur left the warriors' den, she found herself in a conversation about the recent Gathering with Thrushpelt and Whitestorm.

"Of course Raggedstar would say that," Thrushpelt was mewing.

Whitestorm nodded seriously. "I suppose he won't admit that his own cats trespassed even if they did. He has to save face."

"RiverClan and ShadowClan," Bluefur meowed darkly. "It is only a few cats but still, they keep pushing us." She flicked her ears nervously. The other Clans were walking a thin line right now. Trespassing on another Clan's territory during leaf-bare, even a less harsh one, was like asking for a clawed ear.

"Bluefur." Featherwhisker poked his head out of the medicine den. "Goosefeather would like to see you."

Thrushpelt and Whitestorm shared a bewildered glance. "We're kin," Bluefur meowed. "That must be why." They seemed to accept the explanation. Bluefur followed Featherwhisker into the medicine den.

Goosefeather was lying on a thick nest of moss and feathers. Oddly, his pelt wasn't as unkempt as usual; Bluefur guessed that Featherwhisker had groomed him. He gave a feeble cough as Bluefur settled herself beside him.

"Bluefur?" he rasped faintly. A wave of pity stabbed her belly.

"I'm here."

Goosefeather's gaze was absent, and Bluefur thought he had

forgotten she was there until he spoke. "You should have listened." Bluefur tensed at the venom in his voice. "Now ThunderClan will fall. It is too late to go back."

"That's not true," Bluefur insisted gently. Goosefeather didn't know what he was saying, surely. "ThunderClan is strong."

Goosefeather shook his head. "Thistleclaw will lead this Clan to ruin! I have seen it. I know what is to come."

Bluefur let her tail brush his flank in a comforting gesture, a chill running through her pelt.

Goosefeather was silent for a long time, his chest rising and falling quickly as he took short, shallow breaths. "ThunderClan could have been great," he finally wheezed. "It would have survived for generations upon generations. But you just had to put yourself first." Goosefeather's pale blue eyes met hers for the first time, then they grew cold and distant. "You were the fire. But the fire is gone now. There is no fire. There is no-" he shifted his body, gasping. Bluefur smoothed the fur on his back with her tail.

Struggling for breath, Goosefeather raised his head and let out an anguished caterwaul. "Why me? Why was I destined to know these things? Can I not even die in peace?!" He broke off into a fit of choking coughs.

"It's okay," Bluefur soothed. "ThunderClan will be alright."

She sat there for what felt like moons, while Goosefeather's coughing became frail rasps. The pale gray tom was trembling now. Bluefur moved closer to him as the tremors grew weaker, pressing her fur against his. "ThunderClan will be alright," Bluefur repeated.

She shifted forward when Goosefeather beckoned her to lean closer. "No," he whispered, the light fading from his eyes.

Goosefeather stared at her, and then he was still.

Changes

Newleaf brought more changes to ThunderClan. Adderfang and Stormtail retired to the elders' den, and at the end of newleaf, Willowpelt's kits were apprenticed to Tigerclaw and Redtail.

Not all the changes were good though. Larksong, Swiftbreeze, and Tawnyspots died shortly after Goosefeather. Featherwhisker had diagnosed the she-cats with greencough, and although the sickness took its toll on them, herbs were able to relieve some of their pain. They were never in the outright agony that Tawnyspots experienced before his death. Bluefur wouldn't wish the suffering of the former ThunderClan deputy on her worst enemy.

The face of ThunderClan was changing as new cats became apprentices and old ones became elders. But one change overshadowed the others.

It had been a normal morning for the most part. Bluefur had just returned from the dawn patrol, and was about to go hunting with Mosstail when a screech rang through the air.

A white shape shot out of the gorse tunnel. "Dog!" shrieked Frostfur, her blue eyes wide with terror.

Bluefur leaped to her paws and raced over to her former apprentice, but Thistleclaw got there first. "Where?" he demanded.

"By the training hollow!" Frostfur's breath came out in short gasps. "Sunstar was there; I don't know what happened to him!"

"You left Sunstar?" Thistleclaw snarled.

Frostfur seemed to shrink. "I couldn't fight them alone."

Thistleclaw glared at her for a moment, before whipping around and naming the cats standing closest to him: "Tigerclaw, Darkpaw,

Mosstail, Thrushpelt, Bluefur, you're with me." He turned and bounded through the gorse tunnel.

Bluefur followed him, her Clanmates on her heels. It wasn't long before they made it to the training hollow, but Bluefur knew it was a bad sign when she couldn't hear barking. Either Sunstar had chased them off or... She shook her head, trying not to think of the terrible possibility.

But as the patrol rounded a tree, Bluefur spotted a ginger shape lying motionless. "No!" she yowled, dashing to her former mentor's side. She prodded him with her paws to wake him, but he didn't stir. Even at a full on sprint, they hadn't reached him in time.

Sunstar was dead.

"Oh StarClan no!" Wails rose into the air as the patrol dragged Sunstar's body to the center of the camp. Bluefur trailed behind the patrol as cats began to crowd around their dead leader. She still couldn't believe it; her paws were numb in spite of the newleaf warmth.

"What happened to him?" Smallear called out.

"Dogs," Bluefur answered dully, sitting down next to Thrushpelt. The sandy brown tom licked the top of her head; she barely noticed the kind gesture.

Thistleclaw leaped to the top of the Highrock, his expression unusually somber. The cats quieted down, waiting for him to speak. "Cats of ThunderClan, I have terrible news. Sunstar has lost his final life." Shocked meows rose up from several cats who were just emerging from their dens. "He was fending off a group of dogs, and he died bravely."

Bluefur lowered her head, a renewed sense of grief washing over her pelt. A hush fell over the gathered cats.

Adderfang broke the silence after several long heartbeats. "Sunstar was a good leader. ThunderClan will miss him for many moons."

"At least he died defending ThunderClan from an enemy," Stormtail meowed solemnly. "He would have wanted that." Murmurs spread through the camp as Adderfang nodded beside him.

The cats soon began to move forward one by one to share tongues with Sunstar one last time.

The rest of the day seemed to blur together. While every cat sat for a moment with Sunstar individually, Bluefur remained at his side for most of the day- she figured she owed him that much after all he did for her. She sat vigil for Sunstar that night along with Stormtail, Adderfang and several other elders and older warriors.

Mistyfur, Stoneclaw, and Mosstail rested beside her for a short time, comforting her with kind words and ear licks.

In the morning, the cats of ThunderClan made their way out into their clearing for Sunstar's last farewell. Every cat, from the oldest elder to the youngest kit lined up and bowed their heads as their former leader was carried to his final resting place, a glade a short distance from the camp.

After the burial, Bluefur watched as the cats trudged back into camp, and she sensed something had changed in all of them. They were looking at Thistleclaw now, and their faces carried hopeful expressions.

"It is time for me to go to Highstones," Thistleclaw meowed, and turning to his former apprentice, lowered his head in a swift nod. "Tigerclaw, I'm placing you in charge of the camp until I come back."

The huge dark brown tabby dipped his head in return, and Bluefur saw something pass between them. She could already guess who the next deputy of ThunderClan would be.

A full day later, Bluefur was returning from a patrol with Stoneclaw and Mistyfur.

The forest felt different now that Sunstar wasn't there. It was an

empty feeling, one that Bluefur knew well; she recognized it from when she lost Moonflower and Snowfur, and while she knew ThunderClan would develop a new normal, it would also never be the same.

But she knew she wouldn't fall apart like she had when her mother or sister had died- ThunderClan needed her too much now.

"Good work, you two," she meowed, breaking the silence at they reached the boundary of the camp. Mistyfur was carrying a squirrel that was so large its tail dragged on the ground, while Stoneclaw was grasping a sparrow and a mouse in his jaws.

Bluefur led them to the fresh-kill pile, dropping her cache on top, before shaking out her fur. It was already warm and greenleaf would soon arrive, bringing even more heat. Even though prey would be plentiful then, she wasn't looking forward to the harsh sunny days that browned leaves.

"It's getting hot out already," Stoneclaw echoed Bluefur's thoughts as he set down his prey.

"I almost wish I was a RiverClan cat today so I could jump into the river to cool off!" Mistyfur mrrowed in amusement, and Bluefur couldn't help but twitch her whiskers. *If only she knew.* Bluefur wondered if deep down her kits had inherited an instinctive love of water from their father, and the only thing preventing them from discovering it was ThunderClan's aversion to getting their paws wet.

"At least this weather brings good hunting." Runningwind padded up, his tail flicking. "Which of you caught the squirrel? That's the biggest one I've seen since last greenleaf."

Mistyfur raised her tail. "I did."

"That's great!" Runningwind mewed. "I wish I could catch prey like that every day." The young tabby tom's eyes brightened, while Mistyfur shifted her paws awkwardly. Bluefur suppressed an amused purr; their interaction reminded her irresistibly of Thrushpelt's first attempts at conversation with her all those seasons ago.

Stoneclaw seemed to notice it as well. "You're a good hunter too, Runningwind," he meowed, his whiskers twitching. "Perhaps you and Mistyfur should go hunting together and compare techniques." Out of Runningwind's view, Mistyfur jabbed her brother's side with her paw.

"That sounds like a good idea," Runningwind meowed, casting a hopeful glance toward Mistyfur.

Mistyfur gave a mild affirmative murmur, shooting a glare at Stoneclaw when Runningwind glanced away.

Suddenly Runningwind looked up, his eyes gleaming in surprise. "Thistlestar."

Bluefur followed Runningwind's gaze. The new leader of ThunderClan emerged from the gorse tunnel, followed closely by Featherwhisker. The Clan began to congregate around their new leader while Tigerclaw loped to the front of the group, dipping his head respectfully.

"The camp is well, I take it?" Thistlestar meowed.

The dark brown tabby nodded. "Nothing out of the ordinary."

Bounding to the top of the Highrock, Thistlestar didn't waste any time before he called out the traditional summons. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting." Thistlestar sat imposingly above the rest of the Clan, his dark gray tabby fur glinting in the sun. Most of ThunderClan was already in the clearing, and the few who weren't slid out of their dens.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Thistlestar meowed, "I have received my nine lives and a new name. I am known as Thistlestar now." As his words sunk in, cheering spread across the camp.

"Thistlestar! Thistlestar!" Most of the Clan called out his new name, their yowls spiraling into the forest canopy.

Thistlestar allowed them to continue for longer than Bluefur thought was necessary, but eventually he flicked his tail to silence

them. "I can never hope to replace Sunstar, but I will do my best to be a leader he would be proud of." Thistlestar paused, his eyes gaining a steely glint. "With Sunstar gone, other Clans may challenge us. We must all do all we can for ThunderClan in this time of change. We must prove to them that we are still strong. Our Clan has the best warriors, and together, we will defeat anything that dares to fight against us."

There was a scattering of caterwauls that rose up into the sky. Bluefur stared straight ahead, suddenly feeling very cold. Hadn't Goosefeather said Thistlestar would lead ThunderClan into endless battles? She blinked rapidly; even Thistlestar wasn't stupid enough to attack another Clan without provocation. He sounded like he simply wanted to defend ThunderClan. *Stop,* she told herself. *Just because he wants to protect ThunderClan doesn't mean we'll be thrown into a never ending war.*

"Now, to prove that we are still strong, it is time to name ThunderClan's new deputy," Thistlestar meowed. The anticipation in the crowd could be cut with a claw. As a hushed silence fell over the crowd, Thistlestar raised his head. "I say these words before StarClan so that their spirits may hear and approve my choice." Thistlestar closed his eyes, and then opened them. "Tigerclaw will be the new deputy of ThunderClan."

Cheers rose from the crowd once again while Tigerclaw made his way up the Highrock to sit next to the ThunderClan leader, his tail held high. "Thank you, Thistlestar, for this honor. I will do everything I can to serve you, and ThunderClan, to the greatest of my ability."

"Tigerclaw! Tigerclaw!" Cheers echoed through the clearing, filling it with sound.

Once again she felt the same loneliness as she had during Thistlestar's deputy ceremony; while most of her Clanmates seemed exhilarated, Bluefur was just tired. Was she the only cat in the entire Clan who wasn't happy that Thistlestar was leader? *Who do you have to blame for that, Bluefur?* meowed a voice that sounded like Goosefeather. *That could have been you, but you put yourself first.*

Bluefur twitched her ears, pushing the thought aside. Although ThunderClan had a leader she didn't approve of, it also had the rest of her Clanmates. All of them were loyal, and ready to defend ThunderClan with their lives; that had to mean something. Pushing her way into the warriors' den, she settled herself in her nest next to Thrushpelt.

The sandy brown tom flopped over onto his side. "Are you worried?"

Bluefur jerked her head around. "Why would you think that?"

"I can tell." Thrushpelt shifted his paws. "You can talk to me about it, you know."

"I'm fine." Bluefur sighed, and then on second thought decided to confide in him. "It's just that Thistlestar..." she paused, trying to gain control of her thoughts. That was the first time she had spoken his new name, and it felt odd on her tongue. "I want what is best for ThunderClan, and I'm sure Thistlestar does too..."

"But?" Thrushpelt mewed. "If you just give him the chance he might end up being a great leader. I know you and Thistlestar have had differences of opinion in the past-" Bluefur snorted; that was an understatement to say the least- "But he might be what ThunderClan needs right now," Thrushpelt finished, his eyes earnest. "Change doesn't have to be all bad, you know."

Seeing Thrushpelt's kind expression, Bluefur felt her anger soften. As much as she wanted to convince Thrushpelt that she was right to be wary of their new leader, she knew it would be difficult. She was the only cat in ThunderClan who had a problem with Thistlestar, and Thrushpelt wouldn't understand why; he probably thought it was a simple rivalry. Besides, Goosefeather's prophecy probably wasn't real; the tom had been seeing things for seasons when he died. "I know, Thrushpelt," Bluefur meowed. "I know ThunderClan will be fine no matter who leads it."

Seeming satisfied, Thrushpelt settled himself deeper in his nest, and a short while later he was talking to Robinwing and White-Eye.

An electric energy seemed to course through ThunderClan, and cats talked all through the night. Bluefur lay awake for a different reason though. *Did I make the right choice?*

Noticing her three kits huddled together, Bluefur shook herself. Of course she had made the right choice. Her kits were warriors of ThunderClan, well respected by all their Clanmates. How could she even think she had made the wrong decision, when her other choice had been to live a life without her kits?

ThunderClan will be fine. Bluefur reassured herself. *If StarClan truly believed Thistlestar would cause our destruction, they would have done something by now.*

First Strike

Sunstar's death had come as a shock. Bluefur knew that no matter how many deaths she saw, she would always remember her mentor's clearly. But now, a moon after Sunstar's death, the Clan had gained a new routine. Instead of Thistlestar, it was Tigerclaw who organized patrols now, and to his credit, the Clan was running like clockwork.

One morning, Tigerclaw flicked his tail to beckon her. "Bluefur, join Darkpaw and I for the RiverClan border patrol."

She nodded and followed him out of the camp, as Darkpaw fell into step behind her. The patrol was going normally until they reached Sunningrocks.

"Smell that?" Tigerclaw hissed. Bluefur stiffened; she scented it too.

Darkpaw wrinkled his nose. "It's RiverClan." He looked up at his mentor, waiting for his approval.

Tigerclaw snorted. "Typical fish-faces, trying to test us," he growled in disgust.

Bluefur frowned, opening her mouth to breathe in the air, and leaped up the steep sides of the rocks to examine them closer. The scent was faint, and the cat it belonged to was unfamiliar to her. She leaped down and trotted back over to Tigerclaw and Darkpaw, who were waiting at the base of the rocks. "I only smell one cat," she meowed.

"That doesn't change anything. They can't cross our borders, whether it's one cat or ten." Bluefur bristled; was Tigerclaw insinuating that she didn't want to defend her territory? With a flick of his tail, Tigerclaw beckoned them onward before she could form a retort. "We will finish this patrol, and then inform Thistlestar."

They continued along the border, and for some reason Bluefur felt a niggling twitch of apprehension from the back of her mind. It certainly wasn't that uncommon to find that other cats had trespassed on ThunderClan territory, but this would be the first time it happened during Thistlestar's leadership, and Bluefur was anxious to see how he would react.

When they returned, Thistlestar stalked over to the group, his eyes flashing as he apparently noticed his deputy wanted to tell him something, and Tigerclaw wasted no time in informing their leader of the news. "RiverClan cats were scented at Sunningrocks," he reported, sitting down.

"Are they invading?" snarled Thistlestar, looking ready to bound up the Highrock and summon the Clan.

Tigerclaw shook his head. "Not yet. There was just one cat." He let out a low growl. "RiverClan probably thinks we won't respond since we've gotten a new leader recently, but they may be planning an invasion later."

Tail lashing, Thistlestar dug his claws into the dusty ground. "Increase the number of RiverClan border patrols to three times per day, and make sure every cat knows to make ThunderClan's wishes known with a claw to the ear of any RiverClan cat they find." He hissed. "Those fish-faces probably think they can actually win against us. If they keep going, they will soon find that they are wrong."

Tigerclaw dipped his head, looking pleased.

Resting her head on her paws, Bluefur suppressed a shiver. Hopefully RiverClan would have enough sense to stop trespassing.

But RiverClan's scent was detected at Sunningrocks two more times in the next quarter moon. Bluefur wished she could somehow convey to RiverClan how much they were pushing their luck before a full blown battle took place.

No sooner than the thought had crossed her mind had Mosstail walked up to where she was resting by the warriors' den. "How was your patrol?" Bluefur asked.

"More RiverClan scent," Mosstail told her, flopping onto her side. Bluefur felt her shoulders tense. "We even saw a few of their cats watching us from across the river."

"Probably trying to see our reactions." Stoneclaw loped up. "They know we can't chase them through water."

Mosstail twitched her whiskers. "Thistlestar's considering a constant watch on Sunningrocks. We'd catch them for sure then."

Bluefur flicked her ears. "Where is Thistlestar anyway?"

"Tigerclaw's telling him about RiverClan," Mosstail meowed. "Maybe we'll get to do something about it soon." She dug her claws into the ground, looking ready to leap to her paws and race out of camp into battle. Bluefur turned away, shaking her head sadly. Mosstail had never truly known battle; she didn't know what she was asking for.

Later they learned that Thistlestar was merely ordering another increase in patrols along the RiverClan border, along with an additional order to immediately run off all trespassing cats on sight without questioning them first. In truth, Bluefur was surprised at Thistlestar's restraint; she had expected him to jump at the chance for battle the first time RiverClan crossed the border. She had seen Thistlestar consulting with his old mentor, Adderfang, but she didn't know how much the older tom would be able or even want to dissuade Thistlestar from a full out battle. If Bluefur had been leader, she would have opted to wait for the Gathering to respond, and she worried the peace would only last for so long- the next Gathering was half a moon away.

It was only a day later when RiverClan trespassed upon ThunderClan territory once again, and this time, Thistlestar thought that enough was enough. For once, a part of Bluefur agreed with him. RiverClan was clearly testing the waters with ThunderClan's

new leader, and a response might be the only thing that would get them to stop.

When news of the intrusion got back to Thistlestar, he immediately called a Clan meeting.

"ThunderClan you all know what has been happening recently," he yowled. "RiverClan has crossed our borders again." Growls spread through the camp. "But if they want to challenge us, they have given us too much notice. Now ThunderClan will get the first strike." He began to give out orders. "Tigerclaw, lead a battle party into their territory. Take Sparrowpelt, Mosstail-" Bluefur felt her heart drop at the mention of her daughter's name- "and Darkpaw with you."

The cats murmured their support, but Bluefur felt her tail bristling. *Darkpaw?* Bluefur was concerned. Although Darkpaw was nearly a warrior, he was still only an apprentice.

Tigerclaw nodded, and the three cats Thistlestar had named crowded around him. Bluefur intercepted Mosstail before she could leave, and gave her daughter a swift lick to her ear. "Be careful."

"Don't worry, Bluefur, I'll be fine." Mosstail butted her head against Bluefur's side, her blue eyes containing a warring blend of anxiety and excitement. Bluefur sighed; this would be Mosstail's first warrior patrol on enemy territory. Mistyfur and Stoneclaw watched her from the warriors' den, envy clear in their gazes.

Sparrowpelt was already waiting, and as he turned back and nodded at her, Mosstail padded up to walk alongside her former mentor. Bluefur hoped having Sparrowpelt nearby would sharpen Mosstail's battle skills; the older warrior had trained Mosstail well.

Mosstail waved her tail in farewell to Bluefur, and then followed the other cats out of the camp.

Padding up, Thrushpelt nosed Bluefur's ear. "She'll be alright," he mewed, but when Bluefur looked at him, his eyes held more than a hint of worry.

Bluefur was unable to sleep. It was moonhigh and the battling cats still weren't back. She couldn't bear to think of what might have happened to them; there was no way a normal border raid should take this long. After tossing and turning, she was jerked out of her dozing by the sound of loud meowing.

The patrol had returned. Bounding out of the warriors' den, Bluefur searched the group for Mosstail, and felt her legs nearly give out with relief when she spotted the pale gray and white she-cat. Mosstail was safe. She had a rather large scratch on her side, but she was safe. *Thank you, StarClan.*

But wait. She peered at the bloodied patrol. Weren't there four cats in the battle party?

"Where's Sparrowpelt?" Lionheart spoke up.

Tigerclaw glanced down, seemingly angry with himself. "Sparrowpelt is dead." Surprised murmurs erupted throughout the clearing. "His paw was badly injured. We were crossing the stepping stones on the way back and he couldn't keep his balance. He fell into the river."

Mousefur and Runningwind pressed their fur against each other. Sparrowpelt had been their father.

"I couldn't save him," Mosstail choked out. "The river swept him away too fast; I think he might have hit his head on the bottom."

Bluefur padded forward, allowing her fur to brush her daughter's. Thrushpelt walked up as well, and gave Mosstail a comforting lick. Her littermates padded over to her too, Mistyfur brushing past Runningwind in a comforting gesture as she went.

"We searched the river for as long as we could, but we couldn't find him," Tigerclaw finished. "He is gone."

Leaping onto the Highrock, Thistlestar called out the summons for a Clan meeting, and the few cats that had not heard the news slipped out of their dens.

Their hushed whispers grew silent as Thistlestar began to speak. "ThunderClan, we sent a patrol to teach RiverClan a lesson tonight. But one cat did not make it back. Sparrowpelt was a brave and loyal warrior." Thistlestar dipped his head at Sparrowpelt's kits and his mate, One-Eye. "This is a terrible loss for ThunderClan. It should never have happened..."

"-and it never would have happened if RiverClan hadn't insisted on challenging us," Thistlestar finished, glaring at the RiverClan leader from his spot on the Great Rock.

This was one of the most intense Gatherings Bluefur had ever attended. She bristled, intent on observing the four leaders. Their fur glowed silver in the light of the full moon.

Crookedstar whipped his head around. "Thistlestar, I'm sorry for the loss of your warrior, but it certainly was not the fault of RiverClan." Cats were craning their necks to see the two leaders as they stared at each other, neither backing down.

"I beg to differ," spat Thistlestar, unsheathing his claws. "Your prey stealing gave us no choice but to respond, and our warrior lost his life because of it." Thistlestar raised his head. "If you think there will not be consequences for your actions you are sorely mistaken."

"This is outrageous! RiverClan did not kill your warrior!" Crookedstar yowled.

Thistlestar's eyes were yellow slits. "You did when you forced us to defend our territory."

"Sunningrocks belongs to RiverClan," Crookedstar meowed. "You should recognize this by now; all these seasons RiverClan has been doing you a favor by allowing ThunderClan to hunt there." Yowls spiraled into the sky from the RiverClan and ThunderClan cats. Crookedstar's gaze bored into Thistlestar, and he was still, aside from his lashing tail. Raggedstar and the new WindClan leader, Tallstar, watched the confrontation with wide eyes.

Finally Tallstar stepped between the two furious leaders. "Surely there must be a better way to solve this. If you just took a moment to talk-" At that moment a dark gray cloud covered the moon, shrouding the hollow in darkness. Alarmed yowls rang out.

"Problems won't be resolved by talking about them. This Gathering is over," Thistlestar growled. "RiverClan clearly has no desire to talk anyway." With that he bunched his muscles and bounded down the side of the Great Rock.

As they left, Bluefur scanned the crowd for any sign of Oakheart. She saw him at the edge of the RiverClan patrol, and after a long moment he noticed her watching him. He blinked at her in acknowledgement, his gaze filled with more emotions than Bluefur could name.

She tore her eyes away, and Goosefeather's words floated through her mind once again. He had said Thistlestar would plunge ThunderClan into a never ending war. *Is this how it starts?*

First Battle

A quarter moon later, Bluefur was resting in the camp after a dawn patrol when a group of ThunderClan cats hurried through the gorse tunnel. From their furious expressions, she could tell that something bad had happened.

Thistlestar looked up from his spot next to the Highrock as one of the cats, Windflight, bounded forward and yowled as much to the rest of the Clan as to Thistlestar. "RiverClan has trespassed upon Sunningrocks! They have marked it as their own!" Caterwauls of shock and outrage rippled through the clearing.

Within a heartbeat, Thistlestar was on top of the Highrock.

"ThunderClan, we must not let this treachery go unanswered. RiverClan will regret this day for many seasons." Thistlestar paused, his yellow eyes gleaming as he swept his gaze over the Clan. "Tigerclaw, are our cats ready for battle?"

Tigerclaw gave a stiff nod.

"Excellent," Thistlestar murmured. He shared a look with his deputy, and then turned to the rest of the Clan. "Cats of ThunderClan, RiverClan has disrespected us for many moons, failing to recognize us as the true holder of Sunningrocks. But now they have once again trespassed, and ThunderClan must respond with force!"

Whitestorm padded over to sit beside Bluefur. "How many warriors were there?" he meowed to the patrol.

"We could only smell one," called the newest ThunderClan warrior, Darkstripe. "He wasn't there, but we all know they'll be back with even more cats."

"We must act soon, or RiverClan may gain total control," growled

Adderfang, sitting in his spot near the rest of the elders. Stormtail was nodding in agreement.

Bluefur bristled as yowls echoed across the clearing. Surely the trespassing of one cat wasn't worth an all-out war, even with the recent problems between ThunderClan and RiverClan.

"Will we attack right now?" Stoneclaw asked, his tail flicking. Bluefur pushed back a wave of sadness. Did her son think this was a normal part of Clan life, taking on one's enemies with a full on attack at the slightest provocation? Granted, RiverClan had trespassed several times lately, but it was one cat for StarClan's sake! There had to be a better way!

Thistlestar responded, his voice loud and clear. "If RiverClan wants a fight, then by StarClan, we'll give them one. And not just at Sunningrocks." Bluefur's heart dropped. "There will be two patrols taking part in this attack. The first will take back Sunningrocks. Whitestorm, you lead that one. Take Mistyfur, Stoneclaw, Goldenflower, Speckletail, and Runningwind with you." Whitestorm nodded, his expression unreadable. "The second patrol will go through the patch of forest upstream from Sunningrocks, along the river."

"Up the river?" Bluefur spoke up, unable to keep silent any longer. "What does that help us? That's RiverClan territory, Thistlestar."

"It won't be for much longer," Thistlestar spat back. "Taking that area will show RiverClan that we are not a Clan to be trifled with." He swept his gaze over the crowd and kept going. "The second patrol will mark a new border, following the river up to the stepping stones. Tigerclaw, take Darkstripe, Redtail, Lionheart, Patchpelt, Mosstail, and Bluefur- if that's okay with you." His last words were snarled at Bluefur.

"Are you afraid to fight for your Clan?" Darkstripe taunted her. Tigerclaw touched his tail-tip to the young warrior's shoulder, but he still gave Bluefur a distrusting look. Mistyfur and Stoneclaw approached Darkstripe, hackles raised, and Bluefur gave a tiny flick of her tail, warning them not to say anything.

I'm not afraid to fight for my Clan, she realized. *I'm afraid for its future.*

The two patrols made their way toward the RiverClan border before separating. Twisting her ears back, Bluefur could hear the screeching of warriors before they were more than a few tree-lengths away from Sunningrocks. But now she had to focus on her patrol's task. She couldn't disobey her leader's orders, no matter how much she despised him.

"This way." Tigerclaw flicked his tail, motioning for the ThunderClan cats to keep low to the ground. Bluefur felt a pang of revulsion as they crossed the RiverClan scent line; the scent of fish combined with the wretchedness of what they were doing made her gag. They followed Tigerclaw a short distance before he turned back again.

"Bluefur, Mosstail, Darkstripe, you're with me. Redtail, Lionheart, Patchpelt." Tigerclaw motioned with his tail downriver, and Bluefur understood that he was ordering them to begin marking the new border from further down. The three toms nodded and disappeared into the undergrowth, and Tigerclaw veered to the right. "We'll start here."

Bluefur walked alongside her daughter as they made the new border, sharing concerned glances as they went. RiverClan was going to find them before they were done, she was sure of it. If this territory was important enough to RiverClan, the takeover had the potential to cause a war.

"It's going to be okay," Mosstail whispered.

"You don't have to reassure me," Bluefur mewed out of the corner of her mouth.

Mosstail blinked in understanding. "I know you don't like this idea. But maybe it will be for the best." Bluefur snorted in response to her daughter's words, causing Tigerclaw to glare at her.

Bluefur shook her head. "We can talk about this later." Mosstail said nothing, but gave her a sympathetic look.

Abruptly, Tigerclaw pricked his ears. The patrol tensed. Loud yowls were echoing through the woods. Bluefur dug her claws into the leafy turf and squinted at the trees, trying to make out the shapes that were closing in on them, but when the cat came into view it was clear that it wasn't an enemy.

Well, at least the first one wasn't. "They're here!" Redtail yowled, his bright pelt flashing as he streaked out from the trees.

Bluefur realized immediately why he was running. What looked like the whole of RiverClan was following him: Crookedstar, Blackclaw, Leopardfur, Whiteclaw...

Her heart dropped. Oakheart was there too, his normally mischievous expression furious. How could so many of them be here right now? Shouldn't they be at Sunningrocks? The ThunderClan cats watched them, frozen, waiting for Tigerclaw to give the order. "Where are Lionheart and Patchpelt?" Tigerclaw demanded.

Redtail raced past them. "Just go! There are too many!"

Without another heartbeat's hesitation, Bluefur shot off after him, and she could tell Mosstail was following from the sound of paws thrumming the earth beside her. She chanced a look over her shoulder. Tigerclaw was the furthest behind them, yowling insults back at the stampede of RiverClan warriors, while Darkstripe was closer to the rest of the group, a panicked expression on his face.

They headed back at a full on sprint, and as they kept going Bluefur started to feel as though a claw was continuously pricking her side. The patrol was still nowhere near ThunderClan's border.

"What happened to Lionheart and Patchpelt?" Bluefur gasped, catching up to Redtail in a swift bound.

"I don't know." His breath came out in short pants. "There were so many RiverClan cats- there was just no way in StarClan we could

fight- we tried at first- but we couldn't take on- the whole- Clan-"

Suddenly there was a loud crashing noise. Bluefur spun around to see Crookedstar tackle Tigerclaw to the ground. "Does Thistlestar really think he can take this territory from us?" the RiverClan leader yowled, his green eyes slitted with fury.

Bluefur skidded to a halt and ran back toward the RiverClan warriors now as more cats surrounded Tigerclaw. She couldn't let a Clanmate fight this alone. Feinting to one side, she leaped over the heads of several RiverClan warriors, landing on an unsuspecting gray tom. The tom shrieked as she dug her claws into his pelt, and struck at her blindly, but he was clearly inexperienced and Bluefur easily pushed him aside.

There was one less cat holding Tigerclaw down now. With a mighty heave, he launched the RiverClan leader at least three fox-lengths in the air. Flailing wildly, Crookedstar landed awkwardly on the ground, and stayed there.

Outraged yowls rose up around them now as a cat raced toward Bluefur, swiftly clawing her flank. Bluefur was about to respond when she found herself slammed into the ground by another enemy warrior. The pale gray and white pelt of her daughter appeared beside her; Mosstail sprang forward to shove the cat away, and Bluefur was back on her paws again. Redtail was there too, nipping at the RiverClan cats with such speed that they couldn't do anything but swipe at where their attacker had been a heartbeat before.

But they were still hopelessly outnumbered, even with Tigerclaw battling with the strength of three warriors at the center of the group. She noticed Oakheart was there, in the middle, and Bluefur hoped she wouldn't have to fight him.

Suddenly, she heard a familiar battle cry. Whitestorm!

The white tom burst into the battle, along with all the warriors from the Sunningrocks patrol. Lionheart and Patchpelt limped behind them, with Lionheart joining in more slowly. He had a gruesome looking wound stretching across his shoulder and down his foreleg.

"Mistyfur, Stoneclaw, over here!" called Mosstail. Mistyfur and Stoneclaw responded to Mosstail's yowl with a war cry of their own, and the three siblings worked together as one to drive back the wave of RiverClan warriors. Bluefur's chest warmed with pride even in the midst of the battle. The tide of combat was turning. Bluefur could see that the RiverClan warriors were exhausted, and even though the ThunderClan warriors were as well, there were many more of them now.

Tigerclaw's howl sounded above the rest. "Push them back! This territory is ours now!" The ThunderClan cats caterwauled in response to his cry. They spun around to form a barrier, and step by step drove the RiverClan cats back toward the river.

Soon their enemies found themselves surrounded.

"RiverClan, retreat!" Bluefur's ears twitched. That call was Oakheart's, not Crookedstar's. She looked around wildly, and saw the RiverClan leader was still not awake. Two of his Clanmates lifted him onto their backs to carry him away.

Oakheart was not looking very good himself. There were two large gashes running along his fur, one across his flank, the other down his throat to his shoulder. Bluefur was chilled to the bone when Oakheart turned his head, meeting her eyes. Finally he limped at the rear of his Clanmates, his reddish brown tail disappearing into the shadows.

As the last of the RiverClan cats left, Tigerclaw flicked his ears; one of them had gained a deep nick. "What happened with Sunningrocks?" Tigerclaw meowed, turning to Whitestorm.

"We won easily. From what I can tell they left the battle when they realized we were also taking this piece of forest."

Tigerclaw closed his eyes, and then opened them. "Whitestorm, Mistyfur, Runningwind, follow them at a distance and make sure they don't come back, then do a quick patrol of the border up to Sunningrocks. The rest of us," he paused, sweeping his triumphant gaze across his Clanmates, "We can return to camp. We have won. All the territory up to the river is ours."

Cheers rose up from the ThunderClan cats. Bluefur did not join them.

Aftermath

Even though no ThunderClan cats had died, the battle had not been without losses. Lionheart's shoulder injury was so severe that he had to retire to the elders' den early, and Patchpelt's wounds were healing much too slowly.

Looking over at the two cats now, Bluefur could have yowled at the waste. Lionheart was much too young- younger than her even- to have his warrior hood cut short.

"Are you coming?" Thrushpelt pushed his head inside the warriors' den, obscuring Bluefur's view of the two injured cats. "The Gathering patrol is about to leave."

"Just a moment." Giving Mosstail's ear a lick, she stood up. Her daughter was confined to camp because of a leg sprain she'd received from the battle, and was looking a bit put out that she couldn't attend the Gathering.

Thrushpelt flicked his tail as Bluefur joined him. "Don't worry, Mosstail, you'll hear about it after," he meowed.

"I'd rather be there myself," Mosstail sighed. Bluefur's pelt prickled. This Gathering promised to be an eventful one; she could understand why a young warrior would want to see it. She wondered if Crookedstar would demand ThunderClan to return the territory they'd conquered, and Bluefur could only hope that if he did, it wouldn't end in a fight during the full moon truce.

Even among cats that received non-life changing injuries, there were still several at less than full strength. Featherwhisker and Spottedleaf had their paws full; neither would be going to Fourtrees tonight. Bluefur worried they were leaving the camp too unguarded; most of the cats left behind were injured, and if for some reason RiverClan decided to attack the ThunderClan camp tonight... Shuddering, Bluefur put the thought out of her mind. The situation in the Clans wasn't that dire. *Not yet.*

Bluefur walked near the back of the patrol, and the forest seemed oddly quiet as they made their way to Fourtrees. Stars gleamed brightly in the pitch black sky. They seemed to be speaking to her, whispering her name, and she felt the presence of not just her Clanmates, but of StarClan as well. She took a deep breath, and her fur was ruffled by a light breeze that smelled of Oakheart.

She closed her eyes, remembering the good times she'd shared with the RiverClan warrior. What she wouldn't give to go back to those days, when threats of war didn't hang over their heads like storm clouds, when Sunstar had been leader and could be trusted to react calmly and fairly to any problem ThunderClan faced. Bluefur sighed, her thoughts bringing her back to her former mate once again. She couldn't help but wish her kits knew Oakheart as their father, not an enemy warrior. She supposed she had given up that right when she had decided to raise her kits in ThunderClan.

Bluefur resolved to speak to Oakheart as soon as she could, for old time's sake if nothing else. She figured she'd get a chance at the Gathering, after all Oakheart's scent had been carried in the wind. He wouldn't mind speaking to her even though their Clans were in the midst of a conflict; that hadn't stopped him before.

They had soon reached Fourtrees. Thistlestar's dark figure loomed above the rest of the ThunderClan cats for a brief moment, his long shadow blotting out the starlight. Then he flicked his tail and the Gathering patrol bounded down the slope, merging into the crowd of ShadowClan, WindClan, and RiverClan warriors.

Bluefur looked across the crowd of cats, looking for a single familiar reddish brown pelt. But there was no sign of Oakheart. *Perhaps his injuries were worse than I thought. He's probably still recovering back at camp.* That didn't explain why she'd scented him though. Bluefur shook her head to herself. *I must have imagined it.*

As Bluefur padded about the clearing, it quickly became clear that the normal cordial atmosphere was not present at this Gathering. Instead, cats of all Clans were bristling, some even looking ready to attack. Compared to this one, the previous Gathering in which Thistlestar and Crookedstar had argued over trespassing was calm.

Even Stoneclaw seemed tense, and Thrushpelt flicked his side with his tail. "Keep your fur flat. RiverClan is looking for any excuse to attack us."

Stoneclaw nodded, digging his claws into the ground.

Bluefur peered up at the Great Rock. "I wonder what Thistlestar will say," she murmured.

"He will certainly make sure it's clear to the other Clans that RiverClan trespassed first." Tigerclaw appeared at her shoulder, his massive paws forming indents in the sandy ground as he padded up. "We were clearly in the right; RiverClan should have known better than to keep sending cats onto our territory."

"I doubt RiverClan sees it that way," Bluefur replied. She twitched her whiskers; Mistyfur had tried to greet a WindClan cat but a RiverClan tom already speaking to the cat hissed, driving her back.

Tigerclaw lashed his tail. "It doesn't matter what RiverClan thinks." Bluefur continued to look around the moonlit hollow. Was that really true? She knew ThunderClan's needs came first, but at what cost? Was additional territory worth going to war? Tigerclaw's mew interrupted her thoughts. "Hear anything interesting yet?"

Bluefur shook her head. "I haven't spoken to any cat outside ThunderClan."

"I don't think any Clan wants to talk to us," Thrushpelt put in. "I just saw a ShadowClan cat nearly claw Goldenflower."

Tigerclaw snorted. "RiverClan may have gotten to them first, but the other Clans will soon realize how wrong they were."

Mistyfur, Runningwind and Mousefur were standing next to each other, while Whitestorm and Goldenflower were talking quietly to each other as well. No ThunderClan cats were even trying to mingle with cats outside their Clan at this point.

A yowl signaled the start of the Gathering.

Bluefur shifted to get a better view as Thistlestar's caterwaul rang

out. "Finally! There is much to announce tonight. I will speak first-"

"No, *I* will speak first!" Crookedstar cut across him, sounding more furious than Bluefur had ever heard him. Something about the RiverClan leader's tone made even Thistlestar back down, although a growl rumbled in his throat. Crookedstar pushed past the other leaders to the front of the Great Rock and raised his head. "ThunderClan has broken the warrior code and taken territory that is rightfully ours." Bluefur bristled as yowls rose into the sky from the RiverClan cats. "Many cats were injured in this cowardly, unprovoked attack." Yowls of protest from ThunderClan pierced the air now, and Bluefur couldn't help agreeing with her Clanmates. It hadn't been unprovoked; RiverClan cats certainly *had* trespassed upon ThunderClan territory, even if Bluefur didn't think it warranted the level of response it received.

But Crookedstar was still talking. "Leopardfur was blinded in one eye. Blackclaw still hasn't recovered the full use of his leg. And that's not all." Crookedstar paused. When he continued his voice shook. "Oakheart, my brother and my deputy, received very severe wounds. Mudfur did everything he could, but his injuries were too great. He died yesterday."

With those words, Bluefur felt as though she had been disconnected from every cat around her. Oakheart was dead.

She missed everything else that happened, and numbly joined her Clanmates when the Gathering was over. Cats were discussing the leaders' argument all around her, but all Bluefur wanted was to go home, to get away from the suffocating presence of other cats.

Thrushpelt slowed his pace to walk beside her. "Are you alright?" Bluefur wondered if he suspected anything.

"Yes, I'm fine." She looked back, watching the last RiverClan cats leave the clearing, and then turned away. Thrushpelt seemed to sense her distress, and stretched his tail onto her shoulder. Bluefur jerked away. As much as she wanted to confide in him, she couldn't afford to let any cat know the true depth of her grief. Her secret would be safe forever now.

Rising Tensions

In the moons that followed Oakheart's death, Bluefur renewed her focus on her warrior duties. The four territories were peaceful for the most part, aside from a few border skirmishes. Thistlestar still insisted on continuing the thrice daily patrols along RiverClan's border, and aside from the time a single young warrior had crossed into ThunderClan territory in a defiant challenge to ThunderClan's recent territory acquisition, activity by the river was quiet.

Bluefur didn't remember much about that Gathering aside from the announcement of Oakheart's death, but from her Clanmates' conversations she found out that Thistlestar had been an intimidating force in response to Crookedstar's rage, and had threatened him with attacks on the RiverClan camp if they put so much as a single paw on Sunningrocks. Most of the Clan seemed to think Thistlestar was bluffing, but Bluefur didn't think so. If the RiverClan warrior had been at Sunningrocks instead of the stepping stones, she was certain they would have been thrown into an all-out war.

Thankfully though, Crookedstar had backed down, but Bluefur knew it wouldn't be long before some cat or another provoked Thistlestar into ordering another attack.

Battle wasn't the only thing on her Clanmates minds however. With the additional territory prey was running well, and Mosstail was gaining quite the reputation as a skilled hunter. "Look at this!" the pale gray she-cat mewed one day, her tail high as she trotted into camp. Bluefur glanced down and saw that her daughter was carrying a rather large squirrel.

Mistyfur padded up behind her, rolling her eyes. "She's been talking about that squirrel all morning."

"You would too if you had to jump between trees to catch it." Depositing the squirrel on the fresh-kill pile, Mosstail gave her sister

a mischievous glance. "I think you're just jealous of my incredible hunting skills."

"Right. When you fell from one of the higher branches and only avoided breaking a leg by landing directly on top of a squirrel I was overcome with envy-"

"You know, Mistyfur," Mosstail went on, "I can teach you if you want. With enough practice you could probably get almost as good as me. You just have to ask. I'm sure Runningwind would be impressed if you gained new tree hunting abilities."

"What- I don't- why would I need to impress-" Purring, Bluefur closed her eyes, letting the sound of her daughters' good natured dispute wash over her ears. Mosstail's friendly jibes sounded familiar, like how Oakheart would have been if he'd grown up hunting in trees instead of the river. It seemed like every day now that one of her kits did something that reminded her of Oakheart.

Bluefur couldn't help but see Oakheart in Stoneclaw, Mistyfur, and Mosstail. In some ways they were just like him: the way they walked, the way their whiskers twitched in response to a joke... She allowed herself to freely recognize Oakheart in her kits, and sometimes almost thought she could feel his presence. The ache in her chest grew less painful with time.

The seasons came and went. Robinwing announced that she was expecting a litter of kits, and soon after that gave birth to a single tom, Longkit. Bluefur noticed many of the younger cats were especially excited over his birth, including Mosstail, Mistyfur, and Stoneclaw. She figured they were hoping to receive Longkit as their apprentice; with the lack of new kits in recent seasons there were many skilled warriors who had yet to gain that honor. Personally, Bluefur thought it was unlikely; she had overheard Thistlestar and Tigerclaw discussing Darkstripe's readiness to train an apprentice even though he was the Clan's newest warrior.

Time was passing with little to differentiate the days, and Bluefur was glad. Perhaps ThunderClan would survive with Thistlestar as its

leader. Goosefeather had been wrong, he had to be. His mind had been deteriorating in the seasons before he died, and Bluefur figured that the prophecy predicting the downfall of ThunderClan probably wasn't true...

That was what she told herself anyway. It was easy to put her worries in the back of her mind now that the conflict with RiverClan had died down. But Crookedstar still gave Thistlestar furious looks at every Gathering, and Bluefur noticed some of the RiverClan cats were starting to look less plump than usual. She knew if prey ran much worse for RiverClan, they might try to regain the land they'd lost, but for now they weren't desperate enough.

Compared to the length of RiverClan border patrols, the ShadowClan ones always seemed to be an afterthought. It was one of those times that Bluefur was patrolling the ShadowClan border with Whitestorm and Fuzzypelt when the breeze shifted.

"Is that ShadowClan?" Fuzzypelt meowed.

Bluefur narrowed her eyes. The scent of ShadowClan certainly was there. "Yes, but perhaps it's just being carried across the Thunderpath by the wind. Let's check it out." The group trotted along the side of the Thunderpath.

Sniffing at the undergrowth, a sharp tang hit Bluefur's nose. It was much too strong to have been carried in the wind. *ShadowClan. And they're on our territory.*

Instinctively, all three cats crouched at the sound of rustling branches. Bluefur peered through the woods, making out the shapes of dark shadows flashing through the trees.

"Quick, this way," she hissed, flattening herself against the ground to squeeze under a bramble thicket. They had to get a closer look.

Soon they reached a tree with thick winding roots that sheltered them from view. The sound of mewing rumbled from less than a tree-length away. Bluefur had expected *RiverClan* to invade, not ShadowClan. ThunderClan had been friendly with ShadowClan

lately. Why would they risk a battle right now?

"I can go fetch some more warriors to fight them off," Fuzzypelt meowed softly.

Bluefur shook her head. "Wait. They're leaving." Sure enough, the sleek cats darted back across the border into ShadowClan territory, disappearing into the thick undergrowth.

Whitestorm fluffed out his fur against the wind. "We need to tell Thistlestar about this."

Nodding, Bluefur tried to project an appearance of calm confidence, but on the inside she felt a pang of anxiety. This was the first obvious instance of ShadowClan trespassing during Thistlestar's leadership, and she could only hope that it didn't result in war.

They returned to camp to tell Thistlestar about the intrusion. He insisted that they show him. That had caught the Clan's attention; Thistlestar generally left border patrols up to Tigerclaw.

"Where was it exactly?" the gray tabby leader growled, leaping over a fallen log.

"Past the dead tree, a few tree-lengths from the Thunderpath," Whitestorm replied.

As they made their way through the forest Thistlestar continued to talk to his son, ignoring Bluefur and Fuzzypelt. "How many?"

"At least three."

Bluefur listened and led the way, her hopes of avoiding a battle sinking lower and lower. Thistlestar would never wait to warn them off at a Gathering now, not when cats had been seen so far within ThunderClan's hunting grounds.

They approached the spot where the ShadowClan warriors had trespassed, and the patrol immediately tensed.

Blood. And fur. Bluefur sniffed the air, recognizing the squirrel scent mingling along with ShadowClan's. She hadn't noticed it before. "They've hunted here," she growled. But her anger was nothing compared to Thistlestar's.

"They will regret this." Thistlestar's growl was barely audible. "If they believe we are too distracted by RiverClan to fight them off, they are mistaken."

The ThunderClan patrol hid, crouching within the undergrowth beside the Thunderpath. Bluefur was settled next to Whitestorm. His whiskers twitched, and Bluefur wondered if her sister's son agreed with Thistlestar's reasoning for the takeover. Bluefur swiveled her ears. The sound of pawsteps was approaching.

Tigerclaw was at the head of the patrol, his muscles rippling beneath his pelt. His tail gave the tiniest hint of a twitch. The ShadowClan warriors were getting closer. It would be any moment before he gave the signal.

Suddenly Tigerclaw leaped up and let out a war cry, and at his signal the patrol surged forward. Bluefur added her voice to the yowls of her Clanmates as they surrounded the confused ShadowClan cats.

"Run now, ShadowClan crowfood, or you'll never run again!" Darkstripe bounded forward, reaching out to slash at an older black tom.

"What is this?" screeched one of the ShadowClan cats.

"You can't try to take ThunderClan land and expect nothing in return!" Darkstripe yowled back.

"We don't want your land!"

"Trespassers!" The yowls and screeches blended together as the ThunderClan warriors dashed across the scent line and into ShadowClan territory.

They didn't stop once the enemy warriors had been driven away from ThunderClan territory, but continued to charge forward, driving the ShadowClan cats further and further back.

As Bluefur fought side by side with Whitestorm, her paws sinking into the marshy ground whenever she took a step, she recognized the one-sidedness of the fight. With the additional territory ThunderClan had taken from RiverClan, every one of her Clanmates was strong and well fed, and had been for moons. ShadowClan didn't stand a chance even with their knowledge of the lay of the land.

Bluefur ended up fighting a pair of young ShadowClan cats, and although they were nearly as big as her, she parried their attacks with ease. The two were clearly inexperienced and also suffered from overconfidence; in a matter of heartbeats Bluefur had gained the upper paw and sent them scrambling with a harsh jab to their exposed bellies with an unsheathed claw. They only retreated a short distance however; Bluefur watched them with narrowed eyes, daring them to challenge her again.

Stoneclaw and Redtail fought together, and Bluefur gave the two a swift nod when they managed to overwhelm a group of three ShadowClan cats.

She took a moment to search for her other kits and saw that they were both doing well; Mosstail was grappling with a smaller tom while Mistyfur was running circles around a large gray tabby.

Soon the ShadowClan warriors were backed up against the Thunderpath. Bluefur let her gaze follow the path to get an idea of her surroundings; they were at the part of the Thunderpath that sloped and curved upward to head even deeper into ShadowClan territory.

"Give up yet?" Darkstripe hissed.

A large ShadowClan tom bared his teeth in a snarl. "Never."

The fighting erupted with new energy, and Bluefur hissed when a claw dug into her shoulder. It wasn't deep, but it stung. She threw

herself into the battle again, this time finding herself face to face with a flat faced tom. He hurtled toward her, and Bluefur narrowly avoided his snapping jaws. The ShadowClan cats were outnumbered and not as strong as a whole, but they were attacking with all they had.

But it wasn't enough. The ThunderClan cats bit and slashed, and the cornered ShadowClan warriors finally stumbled away, unable to keep up with the speed and number of their enemies.

The cats turned to Tigerclaw to find out what to do next. The dark tabby tom raised his chin. "Well done, all of you." He paused, surveying the blood stained land with gleaming amber eyes. "Darkstripe, Redtail, mark the new border." Murmurs rippled through the group; there hadn't been any announcement that this was a territory acquisition raid.

Then a realization hit Bluefur that made her blood turn to ice. "Wait a moment." Bluefur stood up, her claws digging into the marshy ground. "If we take this territory we cut ShadowClan off from Fourtrees."

"Yes, how will they attend Gatherings?" Redtail spoke up. Bluefur gave him a small nod. He was one of the few cats who seemed to recognize the value in avoiding battles, and at the same time he was brave enough to join the fight without hesitation. Hopefully their Clanmates would listen to him.

"They'll attend if we let them," Darkstripe meowed, and to Bluefur's concern a few cats mumbled their agreement.

Redtail shook his head. "The full moon is a time of truce. They need to at least be able to get to Fourtrees."

Glaring, Tigerclaw snorted. "That isn't our concern. It will be an improvement if ShadowClan decide not to go to Gatherings. Perhaps that will make them think twice about trespassing and hunting within our borders."

As though he was unable to believe what was happening, Redtail blinked a few times. Dipping his head in defeat, Redtail padded

away to mark the new border while Darkstripe headed in the opposite direction. The rest of the cats were silent, but Bluefur could feel the tension in the air. This went far beyond what they'd done to RiverClan.

Keeping Promises

AN: We're roughly halfway done now. Thanks for the votes and comments everyone. I must admit, I'm not entirely sure how Wattpad works since I post more on other sites, so if I've breached Wattpad etiquette at some point I apologize.

Ok onto the news.

Just so everyone is clear, this story is going to get even darker in future chapters.

There's been a lot of intense stuff happening up to now, but in the context of this whole fic, well... you ain't seen nothing yet. If the character deaths and dark tone are bothering you at this point, you may want to turn back.

However if you're ok with intense dark stuff, full steam ahead!

"Tigerclaw, lead a raiding party on ShadowClan territory and give one of their border patrols a lesson they won't forget." It was a remark heard many times recently, and Bluefur was growing tired of hearing it.

"Of course, Thistlestar." Tigerclaw's meow was smooth, quite unlike what Bluefur would expect a cat would sound like when preparing for battle. She supposed he was used to fighting by now as he led most battle patrols; this wasn't news. He quickly beckoned Redtail, Willowpelt and Rosetail and led them out of the gorse tunnel at a run.

From her spot next to Thrushpelt, Bluefur sighed. Perhaps Tigerclaw would have had a chance if he hadn't been mentored by Thistlestar.

She glanced around, spotting Runningwind sitting next to Mistyfur by the elders' den, and at the sight of the swift tabby tom a memory flowed back into her mind. "Remember that one time Mosstail won a playfight with Runningwind?"

"Playfight?!" Mosstail appeared at Bluefur's shoulder and sat down next to her and Thrushpelt. "That was a *mock* fight. Big difference."

Thrushpelt blinked warmly. "I remember you didn't stop talking about it for days."

"I was nine moons old," Mosstail protested. "Nine moons! And Runningwind was about to become a warrior."

The conversation was cut off when Bluefur hissed; tiny thorns were pricking her tail. She whipped around, turning the full force of her glare on ThunderClan's only kit, who sheathed his claws guiltily. "Longkit!" she admonished him. "Didn't your mother tell you not to pounce on other cat's tails?"

"Sorry," Longkit squeaked, ducking his head.

"Well, see that it doesn't happen again." Bluefur fixed Longkit with a stern look, but softened when the young kit scuffed his paws against the ground. "Why don't you go chase some falling leaves?"

"I always chase leaves. It's boring. No one will play with me," Longkit complained. "All every cat talks about is the ShadowClan battle."

Bluefur sympathized with the young kit. He had no littermates and was the youngest cat in the Clan by seasons.

"You could practice hunting crouches," Bluefur suggested.

He narrowed his eyes. "Oh, like this?" Longkit hobbled unsteadily in a circle.

"I can do better than that!" Thrushpelt got up and began to stomp around playfully.

"You'd never catch prey if you do that!" Mosstail meowed, leaping

to her paws. "You need to put more weight on your forepaws." Bluefur purred as Mosstail trod across the ground in loud heavy pawsteps, the complete opposite of how warriors hunted.

Thrushpelt nodded seriously. "You're right. You need even heavier pawsteps." Thrushpelt and Mosstail continued to stomp around as Longkit struggled to control his amused purrs.

Bluefur shook her head fondly. This was reminding her of all the times Thrushpelt had played with Stoneclaw, Mistyfur and Mosstail during their youngest moons.

"That's not how you hunt!" Longkit squeaked when Thrushpelt was done with his demonstration. "The prey would feel you through the ground!"

"Of course they do." Mosstail sat down, a mischievous glimmer in her blue eyes. "That's what you want! Your presence will strike fear into their hearts, and then they'll freeze, realizing the futility of trying to escape!"

Longkit let out a mrrow of amusement. "They'd run as soon as they heard you!" he protested.

"It's how I catch all my prey." Blinking warmly, Mosstail raised a paw and swiped it across her ear. The young striped tom gave her a disbelieving look. "Longkit, why don't I show you how to do a *real* hunter's crouch," mewed Mosstail, and immediately Longkit's eyes lit up.

He gave a little bounce. "Yes! Show me! Show me! Show me!"

Mosstail flattened herself against the ground and began to slowly creep forward. "See now, this is how you move so prey won't detect you. If you were to try and catch something..." She wriggled her haunches and sprang at a dead leaf. "You'd do it like that."

Frowning in concentration, Longkit crouched like Mosstail had except for his tail, which stuck up like a twig.

"Keep your tail lower," Mosstail encouraged him, and flicked her tail at the young kit's tail, gently pushing it so that it grazed the ground.

Readjusting his stance, Longkit stepped forward in quick, tiny pawsteps. Letting out a growl, he pounced on a battered patch of ground. Longkit puffed out his chest triumphantly. "I did it! Just like Mosstail!"

"Well done!" Mosstail exclaimed.

"I can hardly believe that was the first time you tried it!" Thrushpelt meowed.

Purring, Bluefur added her voice to the praise. "You'll make a fine warrior with hunting skills like that!"

"I hope you get to be my mentor." Longkit stared up at Mosstail in awe.

Mosstail twitched her whiskers sadly. "That will be Thistlestar's decision." Bluefur couldn't stop herself from thinking about how Mosstail had grown, from an anxious tiny kit to a mischievous apprentice to the skilled warrior she was now. Perhaps Bluefur was biased, but she thought Mosstail was one of the hardest working cats in the whole Clan. *Stoneclaw and Mistyfur too.* But as she looked around and saw Thistlestar sharing a rabbit with Whitestorm she felt a burst of anger. Thistlestar had his clear favorites, and Bluefur's youngest daughter wasn't one of them. With Thistlestar as leader, would Mosstail *ever* receive an apprentice?

Maybe, Bluefur hoped. As she saw Mosstail instructing Longkit on the proper way to hunt various types of prey she couldn't help but be optimistic.

The quarter moon following the battle had marked a turning point in the impasse the forest had been under since ThunderClan expanded into RiverClan's territory. Unlike RiverClan, ShadowClan had not been so soundly defeated. They apparently realized they wouldn't win a head on attack, but began to send patrols into ThunderClan territory to hunt under the noses of their enemies. Thistlestar ordered an increase in ShadowClan border patrols, so much so that it cut into the number of hunting patrols sent out. To combat this, all ShadowClan border patrols were expected to hunt as well.

With all the problems with ShadowClan, Bluefur was surprised when RiverClan started causing issues.

Later that morning, Darkstripe raced into the camp, followed closely by Mousefur and Brindleface. "Thistlestar! I have important news!" Darkstripe yowled, and cats began to gather in the main clearing. "I found RiverClan scent on Sunningrocks! A whole patrol of them must have been there this morning!"

Murmurs of shock rippled across the clearing. Thistlestar had vowed to attack the RiverClan camp if they trespassed on Sunningrocks. Would he follow through even though ThunderClan was in a serious conflict with ShadowClan as well?

"They're testing us," Thistlestar hissed, beginning to pace. "They think we won't invade their camp. We need to show them that ThunderClan keeps its promises."

More meowing rumbled through the crowd.

Bluefur raised her voice above those of her Clanmates. "Why not just fight them off from Sunningrocks? Surely there is no need to attack their camp; this is their first instance of trespassing in many moons."

Thistlestar acted as though he hadn't heard Bluefur speak. "This patrol will set out to attack the RiverClan camp right away." Closing his eyes, he began to list names, pausing between each one. "Dappletail. Smallear. Thrushpelt. Mosstail. Whitestorm." There was an even longer pause. "Bluefur."

"Can I go?" Darkstripe spoke up hopefully. "I was the one who found the scent-"

"Very well, Darkstripe, you can lead the patrol."

Bluefur froze. This was insane! They were attacking the RiverClan camp to prove a point, not because there was an actual threat, and the Clan's least experienced warrior was leading them!

Chin raised, Darkstripe waved his tail to beckon the warriors to follow. Bluefur reluctantly joined the group, paws pulsing with

dread. When every cat had gathered by the gorse tunnel, Darkstripe flicked his tail. "Let's go."

They headed into the forest. She fell into step beside Thrushpelt and Mosstail and decided to use the moment to give her daughter some needed advice. "This will be a tough fight," she meowed quietly as they made their way closer to the RiverClan border. "Don't take unnecessary risks."

"What?" Mosstail bristled indignantly. "I'm not a kit anymore; I've fought my share of battles."

"Not in another Clan's camp," Bluefur replied darkly. "This is different from a simple border raid; you'll be attacking warriors while kits and elders are sheltering nearby. It will make your enemies all the more desperate." She shivered, remembering her mother's death in the WindClan camp all those seasons ago. "You'd be surprised what cats are willing to do to protect their home."

Thrushpelt nodded his agreement. "We all need to be careful. Cats could die if neither side backs down."

They had soon made it to the stepping stones. After a moment of warily eyeing the swift moving current, Darkstripe began to quickly cross the rocks. The rest of the patrol followed in silence.

From the scent of RiverClan in the air, Bluefur would have known they were close to the camp even if she hadn't seen it before. Her paws sank into the muddy ground as they left the trees behind and followed a path through the reeds. They were too exposed for Bluefur's liking, and she bristled as they settled themselves just outside the RiverClan camp, and waited for Darkstripe's orders.

The dark tom didn't speak. The cats waited in confusion for Darkstripe to do something. He hadn't given any instructions on attack strategy yet and they were already right next to the camp. Another cat would have told them about what to expect, when to retreat, anything. But Darkstripe was silent.

Until suddenly he let out a yowl. "ThunderClan, attack!" Bristling in what appeared to be a mixture of eagerness and terror, Darkstripe

barreled through the entrance and into the RiverClan camp.

He was out of sight now. Bluefur hissed; they were at a poor location and instead of surrounding the camp to take RiverClan by surprise, they were all going in at once. She cursed Thistlestar for appointing such an inexperienced warrior to lead the patrol. But there was no time to think about that now. She was the last to enter the camp and was met with a gale of screeches.

A brown warrior sprang at Bluefur; she jumped sideways herself and faced the tom, growling. Using an old trick she had learned from Sunstar, she aimed for the warrior's shoulder while staring at his paws.

The warrior was unprepared for her and crashed into the ground. The two struggled there, claws digging into the marshy soil as they rolled through the clearing. Bluefur lashed out with her hind paws, leaving deep gashes on the warrior's belly. The warrior was completely exposed now, unable to roll away or fight back. Bluefur was in the perfect spot to end it; if she had been a warrior like Tigerclaw or Thistlestar she might have used this moment to claw out her enemy's throat.

Bluefur couldn't bring herself to give the killing blow. She needed to let him go. But as soon as she let the tom out of her grasp she felt a jolt of horror. His paw swung downward, aiming for her throat...

Thrushpelt appeared out of nowhere, tackling the RiverClan warrior to the ground with the strength of a TigerClan cat, and the tom's claws which had been about to meet Bluefur's neck slashed straight through Thrushpelt's ear.

At that moment she could understand why cats like Thistlestar were so ruthless; one's enemies could be ruthless too. Panting, Bluefur nodded her thanks and rejoined the fight at Thrushpelt's side. That had been close. Hadn't she told Mosstail to be careful, and here she was barely escaping with her life?

The battle went on. Bluefur gained a gash on her shoulder and a bite wound to her foreleg. Blood trickled down Thrushpelt's face from his split ear. ThunderClan was sorely outnumbered.

A primal shriek rose into the air; the black RiverClan tom Blackclaw was pinning a smaller ThunderClan cat, slashing again and again. A yowl pierced her ears once more.

Bluefur recognized the voice. *Darkstripe!* As irritated as she was with the young warrior she didn't want him to die! She slammed into Blackclaw, twisting him around and away from Darkstripe.

Deep claw marks crisscrossed Darkstripe's face, just whisker lengths from his eyes. He let out a howl and sprinted from the battle. Bluefur waited for him to give the order to retreat but he had already vanished behind the reed barrier. She threw herself back into the fight; hopefully Darkstripe was taking a moment to lick his wounds before he came back.

Darkstripe didn't return though. Whitestorm and Dappletail were trading blows with Crookedstar and two other RiverClan warriors. Thrushpelt was grappling with Leopardfur, while Mosstail was weaving between the rest of the RiverClan cats. None of them seemed to notice Darkstripe had disappeared.

It was clear now that Darkstripe wasn't coming back, and Bluefur realized that some cat needed to take charge. They needed to get out before someone got killed. She swerved around a group of RiverClan apprentices and bounded over to Smallear's side; the tom was lying belly down against the damp ground.

Smallear groaned, blood smearing the ground when he leaned his flank against it. "My leg."

"Don't give up!" Bluefur roughly nudged him. "You need to get out of here!"

Smallear responded through gritted teeth. "But Darkstripe-"

"Darkstripe left." Bluefur lashed her tail; it had been foolish to give such an inexperienced warrior a leading role. "Come on now, Smallear, if you can make it out of the camp it's not far from the river. Take the path back; the rest of us will catch up."

Smallear slowly rolled to his paws, and Bluefur noted with a pang

of relief that his movement didn't renew the flow of blood from his injury. He limped away. Bluefur distracted the RiverClan warriors from his escape by hurtling herself into the middle of the crowd.

She waited for his gray pelt to disappear beyond the screen of reeds before she raised her head. "ThunderClan! Retreat!"

The ThunderClan cats wriggled away from the warriors they had been grappling with, but RiverClan still wasn't finished. As they darted across the ground RiverClan cats continued to chase them. One warrior, a small tortoiseshell she-cat, rushed Whitestorm, but the big white warrior easily shook her off. Another leaped at Mosstail, wrapping his forelegs around her neck and churning his hind claws against her belly.

Bluefur hurtled toward him, slamming him aside. Another cat appeared next to them and aimed a pounce at Mosstail's shoulder. Mosstail let out a yowl when the tom pinned her foreleg with his claws.

"Let her go!" Snarling, Bluefur wrenched the warrior off Mosstail with all of her strength. She, Thrushpelt, and Mosstail ran, and Bluefur wasn't sure if she was imagining the shrieks of cats giving chase. She followed the scent trail of Smallear, Whitestorm and Dappletail, not looking back.

The ThunderClan cats quickly came into view. Bluefur raced to the front of the group. "Is everyone here?" she called over her shoulder. "Dappletail? Smallear? Whitestorm?"

"Here."

"Here."

"Here."

Bluefur directed an encouraging mew toward Smallear. "Keep up! Quickly now; we must get back to ThunderClan territory." She turned to Whitestorm and Dappletail. "Help him."

"Where is Darkstripe?" Whitestorm panted, falling back to help Smallear along.

"Ran off," Bluefur answered, raising her nose to pick up a scent trail. Darkstripe had been here; he must have returned to ThunderClan territory already.

As the river came into view, jeers echoed in the distance. Bluefur sprinted the last few fox-lengths to the stepping stones. It could be a matter of moments before RiverClan caught up.

"Go!" Bluefur stood aside, allowing Dappletail to start crossing first. "I'll keep watch at the back." Thrushpelt went next, the blood from his split ear dripping onto the smooth stones. Mosstail followed him, holding her injured foreleg close to her chest as she moved from rock to rock. Only Smallear and Whitestorm were left now. "Help Smallear; I'll keep a lookout for RiverClan."

Whitestorm nodded and indicated to Smallear that he should go first. Smallear jumped, his paws barely avoiding the river, and Whitestorm darted across the gap, ready to catch the older cat if he fell. One by one, Dappletail, Mosstail, and Thrushpelt sprang between the stepping stones and made it to the ThunderClan side. Whitestorm and Smallear made slower progress.

She waited at the shoreline on the RiverClan side for her Clanmates to cross; while she didn't want to spend any more time in RiverClan than was necessary, if they showed up she needed to be able to fight them on even ground. It would be difficult to fend them off while trying to balance on the stepping stones at the same time. Progress was painstakingly slow for Smallear; his injuries were much more serious than she'd realized judging from his growls of pain whenever he made a leap.

When Smallear and Whitestorm reached the halfway point, she decided to head after them. Bluefur leaped along the stepping stones. She wasn't a heartbeat to soon; the moment her paws touched the first stone a renewed spattering of yowls pierced the air from the RiverClan side. She gave them a challenging glare, daring them to follow, but the RiverClan cats halted at the water's edge.

Soon the RiverClan warriors gave up and padded away from the border. Exhaustion set in to Bluefur's muscles, and it looked like it had for the rest of the patrol too. Every cat's tail drooped.

"What happened to Darkstripe?" Dappletail meowed.

Bluefur shook her head. "He left without giving the order to retreat." At her Clanmates' outraged looks she gave another shake of her head; assigning blame wouldn't help right now. "Come on; let's go home." They progressed slowly, and Smallear's breath was coming in sharp gasps. The entire group was covered in cuts and scrapes. *Thank StarClan we all made it out alive.*

A single thought rose to the forefront of Bluefur's mind as they headed through the familiar patches of trees and undergrowth. With the way the fight had been going, they were lucky. ThunderClan had kept Thistlestar's promise to attack the RiverClan camp, but it could have ended so much worse. She let out a rasping purr when Thrushpelt's fur brushed her flank; she would thank him fully for saving her life when they were home. Soon they would be able to receive treatment for their injuries and curl up in a warm nest.

Finally they made it to the ravine. Bluefur was about to pad down the slope without hesitation when she noticed Thrushpelt squinting through the trees. "Do you smell that?" he hissed.

Bluefur froze. *ShadowClan.* Yowls reached her ears, just like the ones she had heard from the other side of the river. They were attacking the camp.

The Wrong Choice

"Quick! They're attacking the camp!" Bluefur flung herself down the ravine, her paws skimming the slope. Twisting her ears back, she could tell that the rest of the patrol was right on her heels.

Bluefur darted through the gorse tunnel, and let out a battle cry. Thrushpelt, Whitestorm, Dappletail, and Mosstail added their yowls to her cry; even Smallear let out growl as he stumbled along behind the group.

Enemy cats were everywhere. ShadowClan must have brought all their warriors because ThunderClan was outnumbered even in their own camp.

Bluefur sidestepped a large white tom and aimed a kick at his black paws, knocking him off balance. Thrushpelt sprang forward, slamming into another ShadowClan cat that had leaped to the white tom's defense.

Twitching his split ear, Thrushpelt paused and then dashed into the crowd of warriors. Bluefur noticed with a jolt of anxiety that Thrushpelt's attacks seemed to be wavering; the fight in RiverClan and the frantic escape had taken its toll. But as soon as she bounded over to join him he rushed the ShadowClan warriors with new energy.

Bluefur lifted a forepaw and flung a small ShadowClan cat away just as a piercing howl met her ears. At the panicked call that Bluefur recognized as stemming from Robinwing, Thrushpelt gave her an alarmed look. "The nursery!"

Bluefur spun around. "We need to get to them."

Nodding, Thrushpelt began to weave around the other fighting cats.

As Bluefur began the long trek to the nursery, slowed by the

ShadowClan warriors that pounced from out of nowhere every step she took, she saw that Stoneclaw and Mistyfur were fighting side by side, and was grateful that her kits were looking out for each other. But where was Mosstail?

Then she saw her. Mosstail's pale gray fur was ruffled; she was cornered by three ShadowClan cats, and no one seemed to notice. Hurrying to get to Mosstail, Bluefur was stopped by a large, gray tabby tom.

Bluefur looked around frantically. Thrushpelt was out of sight; she had lost him in the crowd. Still surrounded, Mosstail struck at the warriors with her forepaws, and Bluefur felt a rush of horror.

Thank StarClan! Thrushpelt had appeared, and with a swift pounce wrenched the warrior off Mosstail's back. Bluefur continued to bite and slash at the ShadowClan cats, unsure how she'd manage to get past them. The fighting was thickest in the center of the camp, and that was where she would need to go to get to the nursery. Goldenflower and Willowpelt were fending off a pale gray she-cat, and Bluefur focused her eyes on them; the two were doing fine on their own. Tail lashing, Bluefur turned and threw herself at a cluster of ShadowClan warriors near the Highrock. The nursery would be fine for now.

A yowl hit Bluefur's ears as she went. She glimpsed the source of the sound through the fighting cats. It was Stormtail, and he was splayed out on his side by the elders' den, a deep gash in his neck. Bluefur glanced wildly over the sea of fighting cats, trying to make out a path she could take to get through. Layer after layer of screeching cats stood between them; it would take ages to fight her way past them. Could she dodge around them?

Mousefur reared up on her hindlegs, blocking Stormtail from view. Bluefur batted a ShadowClan apprentice away with a forepaw, knowing she'd meet more resistance the further she progressed into the group.

Adderfang was fighting where Stormtail had been before, his lips drawn back in a fierce snarl. Bluefur heard a screech from the other side of the camp, and recognized it as Robinwing's. ShadowClan

must have made it to the nursery after all. Swinging her head back toward the elders' den, she narrowed her eyes, and was barely able to see a splash of blue-gray fur past the yowling cats. Stormtail wasn't moving.

She couldn't help him. With a pang of grief, Bluefur ripped her gaze away from her father and turned back to the battle.

The crowd was thinning now, as more and more ShadowClan cats were driven away. Finally, after an impossibly long time, they were gone.

Bluefur sat down, exhausted. After fighting both RiverClan and ShadowClan in the same day, she felt as though her muscles were going to give out. Blood spattered the ground, and several cats staggered about, apparently unaware of their surroundings. Spottedleaf approached them one by one, instructing them to stay still as she applied cobwebs to their wounds.

"No! Thrushpelt!" Bluefur spun around at the familiar cry, so loud against the dull murmuring that was rippling through the camp. It was Mosstail's voice. Racing to her kit's side, she looked down. Thrushpelt lay there, unmoving. It took a few moments to notice the rise and fall of his chest. Mistyfur and Stoneclaw appeared behind her.

"No," Bluefur whispered. A deep slash mark in his neck was welling blood. The wound was deep. Bluefur looked around for a medicine cat, but she knew it would be no use; Spottedleaf and Featherwhisker had passed him by, clearly aware that this wasn't something that could be fixed.

A whimper came from Mosstail's throat. "He saved my life. That warrior would have killed me. Oh StarClan, he can't die because of me." Mistyfur rested her head on Mosstail's in a gesture of comfort.

Turning back to Thrushpelt, Bluefur's heart twisted inside her chest. She should have stayed at his side, instead of running off to face the ShadowClan warriors on her own.

Thrushpelt feebly flicked his tail, and Bluefur realized he wanted her to come closer. Her paws felt heavy, as though they were made of stone. Mosstail, Mistyfur, and Stoneclaw huddled together a few tail-lengths back, pressing their fur against each others.

Shivering, Bluefur settled herself next to the sandy brown tom. The camp was quiet aside from the rustling of tree branches. She began to speak, unsure if he could still hear her. "Thrushpelt... I can't thank you enough. If it weren't for you, I would have died in the RiverClan camp. And you saved Mosstail."

Thrushpelt's green eyes were round and wide, his gaze clinging to Bluefur as though his life depended on it. "Of course I did," he coughed. "They are my kits." Bluefur's throat tightened. It wasn't just because of his love for her that he had cared for the kits; he truly thought of them as his own.

"Thrushpelt, I'm so sorry," Bluefur whispered. Thrushpelt was resting his head on the ground now. "I wish things could have worked out between us, I really do. I'm sorry I couldn't give you the life you wanted..."

Breathing slowly, Thrushpelt looked up at her, his eyes filled with affection that Bluefur knew she didn't deserve. "It's okay," he murmured. "Really it is. It's okay."

He tried to lean forward to rasp his tongue against Bluefur's muzzle, but didn't have the strength. Bluefur gave him a lick between his ears. He took one last shuddering breath. Then he was still.

Bluefur stared down at Thrushpelt in disbelief.

Wails rose up from the surrounding cats as they noticed Thrushpelt's body, jolting Bluefur from her reverie. She bent down, closing his eyes with a gentle lick, and then touched her nose to his ear- the one that had been slashed when he'd saved her life at the RiverClan camp.

She backed away to give her Clanmates room, and the cats began to surge forward to share tongues with Thrushpelt for the last time. Bluefur looked away as her kits crowded around their adoptive

father, not able to bear the raw grief in their eyes. She had never thought that Thrushpelt of all cats would die in battle. Perhaps this was a dream. *Please StarClan, let me wake up.*

But she wasn't dreaming. Thrushpelt's body still rested near the Highrock, speckled with blood. She scanned the clearing, not quite able to believe what she was seeing.

Mousefur was limping heavily, while Runningwind, Longtail, and Whitestorm lingered at the center of the clearing, apparently uncertain of what they should do. Aside from Thrushpelt, Stormtail and Adderfang were dead, and from Adderfang's wounds it was clear he had died fighting shortly after Stormtail. Bluefur knew she should feel something- a young ShadowClan warrior had killed the two elders even though it was against the warrior code- but she wasn't sure if she felt anything at all. Perhaps that would come later.

A small group of cats had formed a loose circle around Stormtail and Adderfang. When they saw Bluefur they parted to let her through. She padded up, and closing her eyes, pressed her head against Stormtail's flank. After a long moment she stood. She had expected grief to jab her belly when she saw her father. But instead she felt numb. It were as though her emotions were locked behind a stone wall, but she could feel them, threatening to seep out. She shut her eyes, and pushed them back. Her Clan needed her right now.

"Are all of you all right?" she asked.

The group of devastated cats murmured weakly. Redtail twitched his tail. "Stonepelt got a pretty nasty cut, but Featherwhisker was seeing to him earlier."

For the first time, Bluefur felt a pulse of anger ruffle her pelt. Although ThunderClan's takeover of ShadowClan territory hadn't been within the warrior code, that was no excuse. How dare they break into a camp and attack elders?

Bluefur glanced around. "Has any cat seen to Smallear? He was already injured in the RiverClan attack."

"Featherwhisker was putting cobwebs on his injuries earlier, but that was during the battle. I haven't seen him since." Redtail paused and scanned the camp. "He must be in the medicine den."

Bluefur nodded and slipped away, trying to stop herself from noticing Thrushpelt's body at the center of the camp. Near the gorse barrier, Darkstripe was curled up, his claws digging into the ground while his eyes flitted about. Even after his disastrous botching of the RiverClan attack, Bluefur didn't have the energy to be angry at the young warrior. She had more important things to worry about.

"Bluefur, how bad are your injuries?" Spottedleaf padded up. She held a bundle of herbs in her jaws.

"I'm fine. Treat the rest first," Bluefur told her. With a flick of her tail, Spottedleaf nodded, and headed back toward the rest of the cats. Adderfang had been Spottedleaf's father. She must be devastated, but she wasn't showing it.

Lying in the center of the clearing was Thistlestar. Featherwhisker sat next to him, herbs scattered uselessly at his paws. Bluefur trotted up.

"Is he dead?" She was surprised her voice was so steady.

"He is losing a life." Featherwhisker bowed his head solemnly. "There is nothing else I can do."

Bluefur sat beside Featherwhisker for a long time, watching Thistlestar, waiting for him to awaken.

Three days later, Thistlestar called a Clan meeting. Although no cat would say anything, it had taken him most of the day after the attack to recover his strength; though his life ending wound had been healed by StarClan, he'd had several others.

Standing on the Highrock, Thistlestar looked as commanding as ever, and he scanned the cats with his dark gaze until they fell silent. "Cats of ThunderClan, ShadowClan has committed a grave injustice. When we protected ourselves from their intrusion, they

responded by invading our camp and murdering our elders in cold blood."

Yowls of fury erupted from the crowd. "Traitors! Murderers!"

"What kind of warriors kill elders and queens?"

"ShadowClan thought they could intimidate us," Thistlestar continued. "They have not succeeded." Bluefur's heart dropped as he continued. "I will be leading a patrol to attack their camp, just as they have done to us. Let's see how they like it!"

Furious caterwauling erupted; Mosstail, Mistyfur, and Stoneclaw were some of the loudest voices. Watching as her Clanmates yowled for ShadowClan blood, Bluefur couldn't push away the realization that threatened to overwhelm her. As much as Thrushpelt had once tried to convince her that Thistlestar would be a good leader, and as much as she had tried to convince herself of the same thing, Goosefeather was right- Thistlestar was going to lead ThunderClan to ruin. She had made the wrong choice.

A Matter of Time

The attack on the ShadowClan camp had been the first of many. It hadn't taken long before Longpaw, now the Clan's newest apprentice, was joining battles like a seasoned warrior.

As the days went on and the fighting continued, Bluefur reflected that at least Stormtail got the chance to die with honor. Knowing her father, Bluefur guessed he would have wanted that.

The loss of Thrushpelt hit Bluefur harder than she had expected. Some of it she knew was because of the pain his death was putting her kits through, and it caused an ache in her heart to see them so grief stricken over the cat they thought was their father. But she grieved for herself too. She hadn't realized how much time she had spent with Thrushpelt until now that he was gone, and his absence didn't seem real at times.

She hadn't appreciated him at all. While she didn't love him like she had loved Oakheart, Thrushpelt had been her closest friend. She wondered what he thought of her now that he was in StarClan. He must know about Oakheart. Did he hate her now? Somehow she knew he didn't; knowing Thrushpelt, chances were he would make friends with Oakheart in StarClan. Bluefur's whiskers twitched at the image.

Resting in the shade of the camp wall, Bluefur sighed, remembering how Thrushpelt had stood with her during most Gatherings. The meeting would be soon, and Bluefur was not looking forward to it. She recalled seasons past when she had been wholeheartedly interested in Gatherings, but those days were long gone; it was difficult to enjoy Gatherings when she was worrying about Thistlestar widening the rift between ThunderClan and the rest.

At least she was not alone all the time; since Thrushpelt's death, Whitestorm made an effort to talk to Bluefur as often as he could. He'd taken to hunting with her in the evenings after their warrior duties were complete for the day. Bluefur guessed he was concerned

about her, but she was secretly thankful. It was nice hearing from Whitestorm from time to time; it helped her keep her mind off ThunderClan's recent troubles.

It was one such night when Bluefur got up from her spot by the warriors' den and bent her head to groom a cut on her shoulder; it was a bite she had received in one of the attacks on the ShadowClan camp she had taken part in.

"How is it?" Whitestorm twitched his tail at Bluefur's cut.

"Not bad." Moving her shoulder, Bluefur winced. "I think I'm well enough for regular patrols."

"That's for one of us to decide." Just then, Featherwhisker padded up, a bundle of herbs between his teeth. Spottedleaf trotted behind her.

"I do think it's getting better. I can at least hunt a bit," Bluefur insisted.

"Let's see." Featherwhisker leaned forward to sniff the cut, and then chewed up one of the herbs in the pile. "Stay still now." A moment later, before she could protest that she was fine and other cats needed herbs more, Bluefur felt pressure on her shoulder, and scented the tang of horsetail, a smell that had become all too familiar in recent moons. She flinched, narrowing her eyes as Featherwhisker applied the poultice. "You can hunt as long as you stay near the camp," he told her finally, stepping away. "That wound is two days old, and it will take many days to heal entirely. Keep that in mind." He turned to Whitestorm. "Your turn." As he worked he spoke with Spottedleaf. "We're running low on horsetail. It would be fine if this was a normal time-" he shot a glance at Thistlestar, who was speaking with Tigerclaw beside the Highrock- "but if this continues, and cats are coming home every other day with injuries, we'll have to restock."

Spottedleaf nodded. "I'll see to it that more gets collected. We need marigold as well."

"There should be a clump of that by Snakerocks," Featherwhisker

told her, rising to his paws. "I can join you in a moment."

Spottedleaf padded away, and Featherwhisker turned to follow. "Come by tomorrow to get your wounds checked." He rested his eyes on Bluefur. "Especially you, Bluefur; bites in particular are prone to infection."

Bluefur bristled; how had he guessed she was not planning to visit the medicine den unless she could avoid it? "I don't want to waste your herbs, Featherwhisker," she meowed. "Use them on Smallear. He needs them more than I do." She shot a look toward the medicine den, hoping to see the older tom, but he was nowhere to be found. Bluefur guessed he was still resting, just as he had been for days; Smallear was one of the few cats who had not been well enough to participate in any of the ShadowClan attacks.

"As ThunderClan's medicine cat, I won't allow any of my Clanmates to fall ill. With all the battles recently, it's even more important to make sure every injury heals properly." Bluefur dipped her head, admitting defeat. It still rubbed her the wrong way that she was receiving herbs that could be used on worse off cats.

Featherwhisker made to walk off, but Whitestorm stopped him with a question. "Are we really that low on herbs?"

Featherwhisker shook his head. "I don't want to worry any cat. It's horsetail that we're low on, and it's usually easy enough to find. We just need to gather more, that's all." Bluefur picked up a nervous glint in the medicine cat's eye, but didn't challenge him as he padded away.

She sighed, turning to look at the camp entrance. Many cats had run through it in recent days, yowling their battle cries as they raced toward ShadowClan territory. All was peaceful now. Mistyfur and Runningwind were eating a vole by the elders' den, while Mosstail and Stoneclaw looked to be sharing a quick word with Lionheart and Patchpelt.

It was quiet for a long time.

"ShadowClan must realize that we won't give in." Whitestorm

frowned, glancing in the general direction of ShadowClan territory. "Then they might attack the camp again."

"Maybe."

"Do you think they'll take the risk?" Whitestorm meowed.

Digging her claws into the ground, Bluefur let out a growl. "They'd better not." Her shoulders sagged. "But perhaps they will. There might be nothing that can stop it."

Whitestorm nodded grimly. "Then we'll be back for them again." Bluefur blinked, sadness prickling her pelt. Her sister's son knew of nothing but fighting.

The full moon shone silver above Fourtrees. Squinting, Bluefur tasted the air, trying to pick out the cats she could talk to without receiving a clawed ear. Rosetail, who usually spent Gatherings with Goldenflower or Poppydawn when she wasn't talking to cats outside ThunderClan, had settled herself next to Bluefur. She shifted her paws, fluffing out her fur to ward off the unseasonably chilly air. Rosetail seemed to think Bluefur needed company, and if Bluefur was honest with herself the she-cat wasn't wrong.

"I wonder if that new litter of WindClan kits were born yet," Rosetail remarked.

Bluefur nodded. "Perhaps they will bring news of it this Gathering." In truth, she didn't know of any expecting WindClan queens, but she didn't have the energy to ask about it. As they waited for ShadowClan to arrive, Rosetail pointed out some of her acquaintances in RiverClan and WindClan, explaining things like how such-and-such's littermate might be getting an apprentice soon, or how so-and-so's son was getting ready to ask one of his Clanmates to be his mate. Bluefur could only nod occasionally.

"And Crowfur there, he's getting on in seasons. Barkface has been trying to convince him to retire since last green-leaf, but he's having none of it. I'll introduce you to all these cats when things aren't so

tense." Rosetail swiveled her head. "Oh, ShadowClan have arrived."

Bluefur sniffed. Rosetail was right. A moment later rippling shadows appeared at the top of the hollow, but Bluefur looked past them. She had noticed Thistlestar sitting on top of the Great Rock.

Thistlestar's whiskers twitched in barely disguised amusement as the ShadowClan representatives bounded into the clearing. His demeanor worried Bluefur. He was clearly self-satisfied at the ShadowClan patrol's predicament; they would have needed to pass through ThunderClan territory to reach Fourtrees and if he chose to make an issue of it he'd have an excuse to order another attack.

Bluefur could only hope it didn't come to that.

As expected, Thistlestar began the Gathering with a challenge to Raggedstar, who responded in kind, and the Gathering kept on in a similar note.

Spotting two of her kits near the front of the crowd, Bluefur blinked sadly. Mosstail glared, occasionally spitting when Raggedstar spoke. Stoneclaw placed a calming tail tip on her shoulder, but even he was staring daggers at the ShadowClan leader. Bluefur knew they hated ShadowClan now, just like she had hated WindClan all those moons ago when Hawkheart killed her mother.

But they were just a Clan, fighting for their Clanmates just like Bluefur did for hers, and she couldn't hate them for that. She understood that now; as much as they fought, they all wanted the same things. Bluefur couldn't begrudge them for fighting for their Clan, but she would fight tooth and claw for her Clan as well.

Then she thought of Stormtail. He was an elder for StarClan's sake, granted, a young one, but an elder nonetheless. And ShadowClan had thought nothing of killing him.

That was one cat, Bluefur told herself. *One cat killed Stormtail and Adderfang. It doesn't mean ShadowClan elders should meet the same fate.*

Bluefur turned to share a glance with Thrushpelt; the empty space

was a stinging reminder that he wasn't there. Her shoulders fell.

When the Gathering broke up, Bluefur lowered her eyes and fixed them straight on the forest, avoiding the other Clans' hostile looks. It would hardly help the situation if cats started fighting while the moon was still up.

Whitestorm's tail was flicking back and forth as he fell into step next to Bluefur. "This can't end well," he meowed, taking care to avoid a group of passing ShadowClan cats. Thistlestar was allowing them to use ThunderClan territory to travel to and from Gatherings... for now.

On Whitestorm's other side, Rosetail padded along with her tail held high. "Just wait." Rosetail's mew was confident and hopeful, and surprisingly serious for the gossip loving she-cat. "At the end of all this fighting, there will be peace. It has to come anytime now."

But it wasn't meant to be. Not a quarter moon later, Runningwind raised the alarm call: ShadowClan was trying to retake their territory beside Fourtrees. Bluefur watched as Thistlestar organized a group to attack. Almost every warrior was chosen; Bluefur was one of the few cats who stayed behind to guard the camp, as her shoulder injury hadn't yet healed. Mousefur, Runningwind, and Mistyfur hadn't joined the battle as well, and Spottedleaf settled herself among the group too. Featherwhisker had gone along with the patrol, carrying much of ThunderClan's supply of healing herbs.

It was later that night when the scent of blood told her that something was wrong. Bluefur raised her head, ready to call the alarm if ShadowClan warriors had followed the group. She wasn't prepared for what she saw.

It was not ShadowClan, but Featherwhisker. The pale tabby was limping into camp, blood dripping from his fur. He collapsed to the ground as his Clanmates surged around him, some from the warriors' den, others charging back from the battle through the gorse tunnel.

"Who did this?" Mousefur stalked up to him, outraged that any cat would attack a medicine cat.

Featherwhisker winced. "I'm not sure. I don't think they could tell who I was. Everyone was so close together." Forepaw swathed in cobwebs, Spottedleaf darted up and pressed her paw down on Featherwhisker's injury.

Voices rose up all around as the cats chosen for the patrol trickled back into camp and shared news.

"No sign of ShadowClan here, right?"

"No, thank StarClan."

"Did we win at least?"

"I wouldn't call a fight like this a win for any cat."

It was that moment that Thistlestar burst into the camp. "Cowards!" he snarled, raking his gaze across the ThunderClan cats. Every cat stopped talking. "You left the battle before I gave the order to retreat! Have you no honor?! We would have defeated them! ShadowClan wouldn't have dared challenge us again!" Thistlestar's yowl reverberated off every corner of the camp. "But now?" He glared at the cats, who looked away.

Mosstail twisted her ears back, while Darkstripe's eyes guiltily flicked downward. Like a shadow, Tigerclaw stood at Thistlestar's shoulder. The tabby deputy had obviously been one of the few cats who had stuck with Thistlestar to the end.

"I do not think they will challenge us for a long time," Whitestorm spoke up before Thistlestar could continue. "ShadowClan experienced heavy losses. At least two of their warriors are dead, and I have no doubt many are injured. They are in no state to attack us."

Thistlestar stared at his son, and Bluefur wondered if he was going to yowl at him that he was a coward. "Whitestorm, lead a patrol along the ShadowClan border, and make certain they don't try anything."

Whitestorm bent his head, summoned Mosstail and Mousefur with a glance, and led them into the forest. Bristling, Thistlestar loped to his den without another word.

Now finished covering Featherwhisker's wound with cobwebs, Spottedleaf dabbed it with her paw. "That needs treatment to prevent an infection. I'll get you some horsetail."

Shaking, Featherwhisker shook his head and crouched down. "I used the last of it yesterday. Try marigold, and if that's gone see if there's any burdock root left in the store."

But Spottedleaf came back empty pawed, her amber eyes betraying a hint of worry.

Featherwhisker shifted his paws. "I suppose we'll have to go with oak leaves."

"Perhaps we've used all the burdock root on our territory, but we can't have picked all of the horsetail or marigold." Spottedleaf's determined mew gave Bluefur hope. "There must be more somewhere. I can search for it, and hopefully some will grow back soon too."

But the entire supply of horsetail, marigold, and burdock root in ThunderClan had been used, and in the unseasonably cold weather, there wasn't any left in the territory. So as the moon went on, Featherwhisker sported a deep wound in his side that oak leaves couldn't heal. In spite of the skills of both himself and his apprentice, he grew weaker. There was only so much a cat could do without healing herbs. Although she tried to deny it, Bluefur knew that it was only a matter of time before he succumbed.

A Chance

Featherwhisker died near the end of greenleaf. Like the rest of her Clanmates, Bluefur had mourned. He had been relatively young; he didn't deserve to go so soon.

Thankfully though, ThunderClan still had Spottedleaf. Bluefur didn't have to know healing herbs to tell that Spottedleaf was a gifted medicine cat, and she knew that the medicine den was in good paws. Spottedleaf would do her best, just like every cat in the Clan. They were going through a hard time, but it didn't mean it was the end.

It had been only a few days since Featherwhisker's death, and Bluefur was resting in the warm midday sun. Sighing, she took in the appearance of the ThunderClan camp.

Spottedleaf was drying her newly gathered herbs in the patches of sunlight. It had been like a cruel joke- in the days following Featherwhisker's death, she had found a small amount of horsetail, along with sweet sedge, a RiverClan herb that would make a passable substitute when the horsetail ran out.

By the nursery, Robinwing was resting, her belly heavy with kits. They would probably arrive within the moon. Next to her were White-Eye and Poppydawn. *Sharing stories about their kits,* Bluefur guessed, noting the familiar expressions on their faces. Longpaw stood nearby, looking as much a warrior as any other cat. He would earn his name soon. Bluefur remembered the time that seemed like so many seasons ago already, when Thrushpelt and Mosstail had playfully taught him how to hunt.

Whitestorm and Patchpelt were standing by the fresh-kill pile, deep in conversation, their pelts dappled by the late greenleaf sun.

Lionheart limped along near the edge of the camp, a thin bramble stem between his teeth. Although he could no longer hunt or fight, he did anything he could to contribute to the Clan. Goldenflower

padded up, giving her brother's side a friendly nudge.

Bluefur shook her head in amusement. She couldn't imagine having any other cats for Clanmates.

Rosetail trotted up, her tail waving. "Have you heard?" she meowed quietly.

Bluefur blinked, utterly bewildered. From Rosetail's mew, something very important must have happened, and she immediately thought of her wounded Clanmates. Mistyfur's scraped leg couldn't have recovered yet; what if it was infected? Or Whitestorm, he had twisted his paw the other day- what if the injury was worse than he'd let on? Bluefur felt her fur begin to rise. "Heard what?"

Rosetail twitched her whiskers. "Brindleface is expecting kits."

At once Bluefur stopped bristling. "That's good news. How long?"

"Two moons or so. Robinwing's kits will have playmates." Rosetail gave an amused purr. "Mosstail and Runningwind are making bets on how many."

"I bet they are." Bluefur shook her head to herself. Redtail and Brindleface had spent a great deal more time together recently, and the Clan had been expecting an announcement of kits any day. How could she have forgotten?

"Mistyfur didn't want a part of it- the talk Mosstail and Runningwind were having about how many kits there'd be, I mean," Rosetail told her. "She and Runningwind had a minor argument about it. Mistyfur thought the birth of new kits was a much too important topic to speculate about. They're fine today though." Purring, Rosetail tilted her head. "You know, they remind me a bit of how you and Thrushpelt were before you had kits." Rosetail glanced toward the warriors' den.

"Who?" Bluefur asked, but she already knew who Rosetail was talking about; Mistyfur's blue-gray pelt was visible within the shadows of the warriors' den, along with a lighter tabby pelt

nearby.

Rosetail eyes glimmered mischievously. "Runningwind and Mistyfur, obviously. Haven't you seen them together? They bring back so many memories: Thrushpelt padding after you-" twisting her ear back, Bluefur gave a good-natured eye roll- "you denying Thrushpelt was your mate..."

"Mistyfur does take after me quite a bit," Bluefur replied evasively. Even though both Oakheart and Thrushpelt weren't around, she still wasn't about to betray their trust.

"Perhaps she will mentor one of Brindleface's kits," Rosetail meowed thoughtfully. "She's certainly ready for an apprentice."

Bluefur nodded, glad to be free of the topic of her kits' supposed father. "Or Mosstail or Stoneclaw. All of them are long overdue for their first apprentice. Whitestorm too, he has been more than ready since they were born."

As they talked the day away, Bluefur found that she was unusually happy at the news of Brindleface expecting kits. There hadn't been multiple litters in the nursery since her own were young. It would be good to see kits making friends with each other instead of spending their days lonely like Darkstripe and Longpaw had. And then they would become apprentices, and then warriors...

Bluefur closed her eyes, and let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. ThunderClan would have a chance now.

Yet as surely as the sun rose, a new day meant a new battle, and the day after Bluefur learned Brindleface was to have kits was no different. This time ShadowClan had crossed the Thunderpath, intent on taking back their territory by Fourtrees once more. The pine-oak forest was alive with caterwauling- it echoed off the trees and bushes.

Bluefur crouched down, narrowing her eyes. She was stalking the edge of the skirmish after receiving a deep bite to her hind leg,

readying herself to re-enter the fray. Her conversation with Rosetail the previous day had reinvigorated her; even in combat things hadn't seemed so bleak with the knowledge that ThunderClan would soon gain new kits.

As usual, it hadn't taken long to reach the point that ShadowClan was beginning to show signs of preparing their retreat, but they still had some fight left in them. Aiming for a tortoiseshell warrior grappling with Whitestorm, Bluefur pushed herself into the air and landed squarely on top of the she-cat.

Shrieks buffeted Bluefur's ears but she paid them no heed. She lost sight of Whitestorm as the tortoiseshell warrior shot off. She was next to Mosstail and Tigerclaw now. The ThunderClan deputy had wrapped his forelegs around a pale ShadowClan tom's neck and was churning his massive hind claws against the cat's belly again and again. The pale tom's eyes rolled back in his head...

Rolling to the side, Bluefur dodged a pouncing apprentice and caught the ThunderClan deputy's eyes. "He has learned his lesson, Tigerclaw!" The ThunderClan deputy stared at her, his attack halted, although Bluefur guessed that was more from shock at being told what to do than anything else.

With a growl, Tigerclaw reluctantly loosened his grip, allowing the warrior to stumble away, but not before first scoring his claws across the tom's flank.

Bluefur flinched watching him go. If the cat ever forgot this battle, the scars would certainly remind him.

"They're leaving!" Mosstail panted. As though the last of the ShadowClan warriors heard her mew, they slipped away from their opponents. Breathing hard, Bluefur sat down, taking care to keep weight off her hind leg. There weren't enough ShadowClan cats for every ThunderClan one to fight individually, and the wave of enemies diminished by the second.

Only two ShadowClan cats were left in the end. Mistyfur and Runningwind snapped at their heels, but there was no need; the remaining cats pelted away, their tabby stripes a dark blur.

Bluefur looked around, taking note of the cats she saw. Mosstail and Mistyfur were fine; they were limping, but their mews were calm. Stoneclaw was back at camp, so she didn't need to worry about him. Frostfur was alright, as were Runningwind, Mousefur, Rosetail, and Goldenflower. Whitestorm was nowhere to be seen.

A sorrowful wail pierced the sky.

The cats were gathering around a point a short way off from the Thunderpath. Bluefur peered through the crowd, and her heart jolted when she saw a flash of pale fur and a motionless white paw. *No!*

Whitestorm couldn't be dead! She'd only been separated from him for a moment! She sprang forward, pushing herself into the group.

The crowd parted and Bluefur skidded to a stop at its front.

She nearly collapsed in relief; it was not Whitestorm, but Fuzzypelt; she'd only caught sight of one of the black-and-white tom's patches of white fur. Whitestorm appeared next to her, bowing his head when he saw Fuzzypelt's body.

Bluefur's tail fell limp, and the pain in her paw returned. She felt an aching sense of gratefulness mingled with guilt. While he was a Clanmate, she and Fuzzypelt hadn't been close. She was saddened of course, especially for the kits he would never know, and Robinwing, his mate. But Whitestorm...

Bluefur shivered as they began the slow trek home. She didn't know how she would have coped if Whitestorm had died.

Leaf-fall Again

AN: Ahhh, I didn't mean for this to take so long! Writer's block and life happened, but I'm back now.

The battles were taking their toll on ThunderClan. Whenever Bluefur had a spare moment, she listed the names of the most recent dead in her mind, so she could find the will to fight on: Fuzzypelt, Windflight, White-Eye, Smallear. Most of the cats she had known during her kithood were gone now. *Leopardfoot.* Bluefur shuddered at the memory of her friend's death. The she-cat had been hit by a monster on the Thunderpath on the way back from one of ThunderClan's attacks on ShadowClan.

It wasn't just ThunderClan attacking either; RiverClan and ShadowClan sometimes sent patrols into ThunderClan's hunting grounds. That was how Poppydawn had died. The elderly she-cat had been on a leisurely stroll when ShadowClan attacked. They had given her a minor scrape, but she wasn't able to fight off the infection that ensued.

Robinwing too, had died just a moon previous from sickness, and her death had hit the Clan especially hard since she had been carrying kits. The lack of young cats was becoming a dire situation now, and the loss of an expecting queen certainly didn't help. Willowpelt had recently announced that she was to have kits, but it did little to quell the tension that was seeping into every corner of the ThunderClan camp.

Bluefur tried to shake herself from her thoughts. Whitestorm was trotting next to her as they made their way along the Twolegplace border. It was leaf-fall, and the treetops were turning orange once again.

Bluefur bent to lap water from a puddle. When she sat up her reflection caught her eye. Her muzzle was patched with gray. "I

think I'm getting old."

"No, you're not," Whitestorm scoffed.

Bluefur narrowed her eyes teasingly. "How long has my muzzle been silver then?"

Whitestorm frowned thoughtfully. "Not that long... I don't think."

Bluefur stared down at the water. She wasn't that old, but she certainly wasn't the young cat she used to be. It was strange; she always imagined herself as how she'd looked at four seasons old, young and strong with no battle scars. Now her pelt was marked with several thin lines- the marks of enemy warrior claws. She squinted down at the rippling water. "You know, Whitestorm, this scar on my shoulder looks much worse from this angle."

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"I don't remember," Bluefur meowed. She twitched her tail. "That may be a bad sign."

Whitestorm nodded. "We fight far more than we did when I was young. The battles blend together, I think." He frowned seriously. "Sometimes I fear that ThunderClan will be swept away by fighting."

Bluefur blinked in surprise. "I didn't think you feared the battle."

Whitestorm shook his head. "It is not that I fear war. I fear that once it starts it will never end."

It has already started. Looking away, Bluefur felt grief wash through her pelt. Whitestorm had grown so wise.

When Bluefur returned to camp later that day, her two daughters met her at the entrance. "Brindleface just had her kits," Mistyfur informed her. "Redtail and Spottedleaf are with her now."

Bluefur glimpsed Brindleface's pale tabby form through the gap in

the nursery. She felt a pang of sympathy as she saw the queen resting her head on a paw. Bluefur couldn't see any kits through the entrance.

Mosstail narrowed her eyes. "How many do think there are?"

"I'm betting on three." Stoneclaw trotted up, Runningwind and Mousefur close behind.

"Two," Runningwind meowed.

"Hopefully four or five," Mosstail put in. "Then we can all have apprentices."

"Hush," Goldenflower mewed, trotting past. "We should be grateful as long as the kits are healthy, no matter how many there are." Bluefur nodded agreement. She shared Goldenflower's sentiment but at the same time understood why cats would hope for Brindleface to have a large litter. ThunderClan needed warriors.

Mosstail's ears pricked just then; Spottedleaf had emerged from the nursery. The tortoiseshell's eyes were bright and her whiskers twitching.

Most of the Clan had been waiting and began to crowd around her for news. "How is she?" Darkstripe called out.

"Brindleface is fine," Spottedleaf reassured them. "And her kit is healthy too."

The cats purred, their tails twitching.

"It's a she-kit," Redtail added, padding out of the nursery himself. He puffed out his chest. "She's strong, like her mother."

Cats began to mew their congratulations, but Bluefur couldn't stop one thing from tinting her happiness: Brindleface had only had a single kit. It was concerning how few kits had been born recently. *Hopefully Willowpelt's litter will be bigger.* The pale she-cat touched her tail to Redtail's shoulder, purring, clearly overjoyed. Redtail and Willowpelt were littermates, and Bluefur guessed that they both were looking forward to having their kits be raised among kin.

A few cats wanted to see the kit but Spottedleaf shooed them away. "Not today. Brindleface is much too tired for so many visitors." The cats mewed their acceptance but continued to linger by the nursery. Bluefur watched them speaking brightly of the future, and wished she could be that optimistic.

"It is good that Brindleface's kit is healthy," Whitestorm meowed after a long moment.

"It is," Bluefur replied, but from the look she shared with Whitestorm, she could tell that he was worried too. If Willowpelt's litter was small as well it could pose problems. "Perhaps one day you will mentor her," she went on, trying to move on to a more positive topic. "You've accomplished a great deal as a warrior, and I'm sure Thistlestar thinks so too."

Mosstail padded up before Whitestorm could answer. "I'm surprised Thistlestar hasn't given you an apprentice before now. You deserve it, after all you've done."

"There are many warriors to choose from," Whitestorm replied modestly. "What matters most is how well the mentor and apprentice will get along. I can hardly presume that Thistlestar will choose me, even if I have more experience."

And even if you're his son, Bluefur thought. Whitestorm was so different from his father, she reflected, that if she hadn't known she might not have guessed they were related. Where Thistlestar was impulsive and hot-headed, Whitestorm was calm and composed. Bluefur wasn't sure where he'd gotten it. He was a bit like Snowfur in a way, but even Snowfur hadn't possessed his quiet dignity.

Cats were still talking with each other; most seemed oblivious to the problems that small litters of kits would bring. There was an undercurrent of tension in the air too, but to Bluefur it felt separate from her worries about ThunderClan's future, more immediate.

She heard a sharp crunching noise, and turned her head. No other cat seemed to notice the sound, and she wondered if she was hearing things.

Her pelt prickled. Something was wrong. She heard it again- it was a snapping twig, and it was coming from outside the camp. She caught Whitestorm's eye, angled an ear toward the camp boundary, then fell to a half-crouch and slipped through the gorse tunnel.

The ravine was empty, but a steady wind was rustling the tree branches overhead. The other Clans couldn't attack now, Bluefur thought. What cruel timing it would be, to send a battle patrol during ThunderClan's most carefree day in moons. Perhaps she was getting ahead of herself expecting battle after hearing a single crunched branch, but she wasn't willing to ignore her gut. She needed to check for intruders.

Whitestorm stalked up to her, keeping low. "What is it?"

"Thought I heard something," she murmured. Bluefur scanned the undergrowth, ready for enemies to reveal themselves, but there were none. They waited at that spot for a long time, as their fur was ruffled by the growing breeze. Then there was a crackling of leaves behind them.

Ready to call out an alarm, Bluefur whipped around, and found herself staring at Mosstail.

"What's going on?" Mosstail mewed.

"Great StarClan, I didn't notice you there." Bluefur exhaled, forcing her hackles flat. "Something's not right. There is something out here- I heard it." She stepped forward and tasted the air. Though she scented nothing but leaves and mulch, she was still on edge.

Mosstail sounded sure of herself, but her tail gave an anxious twitch. "No Clan in their right mind would launch an attack so deep in our territory right now, would they?" she mewed. "It's broad daylight."

Even though Bluefur knew her daughter had a valid point, it didn't ease her nerves. "Go back to camp and see if Thistlestar will send out a patrol," she meowed, reflecting that as much as she disagreed with most of Thistlestar's decisions, she could at least expect him to take the threat of an attack seriously. "It may be nothing but we

can't be too careful."

Nodding, Mosstail trotted back inside the camp, her tail still flicking nervously. It was rare to see the young she-cat so concerned these days.

The sky was a brilliant pale blue as Bluefur and Whitestorm sat in silence. All was quiet apart from the rustling of leaves.

They waited, but heard nothing more. Whitestorm took a few paces forward. "Perhaps it was the wind."

"Perhaps." She was feeling a bit ridiculous now; there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. Yet Bluefur was certain she had heard that sharp crackling sound- the wind wouldn't snap a branch like that. There was a gentle breeze, and no gusts sprang up that were anywhere near strong enough to break twigs.

Mosstail had apparently told Thistlestar about Bluefur's suspicions; Tigerclaw, Rosetail, and Darkstripe slipped out of the gorse tunnel, their ears swiveling cautiously, and behind them were Stoneclaw and Mistyfur, who split from the group and began to circle the opposite way around the outer camp boundary. Runningwind joined them, and after him came Thistlestar and Mousefur. More warriors were waiting behind the screen of brambles.

"Great StarClan, I didn't mean for Thistlestar to send the whole Clan," Bluefur muttered. She was never going to hear the end of it if there were no trespassers.

"Better to have too many warriors for a patrol than too few," Whitestorm pointed out.

"True." Bluefur tasted the air and found that all she could scent was ThunderClan.

Just then shriek reached Bluefur's ears.

Further up the ravine and out of the sight line of the gorse tunnel, a group of unfamiliar warriors burst out of the undergrowth. From the other direction, ThunderClan warriors raced to meet them. Thistlestar led the charge.

"I knew it!" she spat, leaping to her paws.

Whitestorm raised his nose. "RiverClan this time. They must have looped around to find a protected spot." They sprang toward the fighting, joining the group of ThunderClan warriors rapidly closing the distance between them.

As soon as they reached the others, Bluefur knew they were in trouble. The battle had started moments earlier and cats were already bloodied; Mousefur fled for the camp, her ears covered in scratches, while a RiverClan warrior with a deep gash in her shoulder ran the opposite direction into the forest. The RiverClan cats were purposely arranging themselves further apart than they usually did. Bluefur recognized the point of their new strategy; there were too many enemies for ThunderClan to keep out if they were spread out like this.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, several RiverClan cats darted out from the group of shrieking, fighting cats, and pelted toward the camp entrance. Bluefur made up her mind. To have a chance they would have to fight inside the camp, whether Thistlestar thought that was the best choice or not.

"Fall back! Defend the camp!" Without checking to see if the patrol was following, Bluefur barreled down the slope and shot through the gorse tunnel. Thankfully, Whitestorm and Rosetail were right behind her, and a moment later she heard Thistlestar and Tigerclaw, yowling for the ThunderClan cats to follow them.

Willowpelt and Patchpelt had been dozing at the center of the camp, and they looked up in shock as RiverClan warriors streamed into the camp.

Bluefur shoved them into the nursery, and then spun around to guard the entrance. Redtail was there too, hissing and spitting with a ferocity Bluefur didn't know he possessed. She took up a spot beside him. There was only a single kit in ThunderClan; they had to defend her.

Whitestorm must have noticed Bluefur's and Redtail's attempt to defend the nursery; he tried to steer two warriors away from them.

Redtail was lashing at a black and white tom. Bluefur eyed another cat nearby.

The tabby warrior glared at her, his eyes crazed and bloodshot. Bluefur barely had the chance to brace herself before he pounced, but she easily threw him aside; the tom was in no state to fight like this. He charged at Bluefur again, and she dodged, then rolled him onto his back and pinned him down.

Bluefur stared down at him. He was gasping for breath and blood trickled from his nose. The warrior could not defend against a killing bite in this condition.

Bluefur knew she could not kill this cat. She sheathed her claws, and the tom stumbled to his paws and slipped out of sight. Hopefully he would try to make a run for his camp. Several RiverClan cats already had.

But it was only a moment later when she saw him again; the tom had ducked behind the other cats and was creeping up on Whitestorm, who was still fighting the two other warriors. Before Bluefur could call out a warning, the tabby tom leaped onto Whitestorm's back, taking him by surprise. He closed his jaws around Whitestorm's neck-

"No!" Bluefur charged forward, and just then a pale blur flashed in front of her eyes. A RiverClan warrior aimed a swift kick at her head.

Bluefur was thrown to the ground and saw no more.

Bluefur's head pounded. She felt sand between her claws.

What happened? She blearily opened her eyes. She was lying on the dusty patch of ground by the nursery. Ears buzzing, she pushed herself into a sitting position, and tested her limbs one by one. It was sluggishly coming back to her: she had been running, and a moment later she had been knocked out. Bluefur had no idea how much time had passed, but from what she could tell the battle was

over. She caught sight of Mistyfur grooming a shallow wound on her flank. Muted yowls were still echoing through the clearing; Bluefur recognized one of the voices as belonging to Brindleface.

A group of cats had formed a circle near the Highrock. Bluefur saw a patch of dark gray fur at its center. Apparently Thistlestar had lost a life. Bluefur's heart fell; he wasn't the only one. Redtail and Willowpelt were both lying dead, just paces from the nursery entrance. *Oh, StarClan no. Willowpelt...* Bluefur shook her head. Hadn't she pushed Willowpelt away from the fighting herself? The battle must have intensified after she had lost consciousness. And Redtail too, dead so soon after his daughter had been born. Brindleface crouched near his body, a wail rising from her throat.

"Bluefur, are you alright?" Mosstail padded up, looking alarmed. "I can fetch Spottedleaf."

Bluefur turned, seeing Spottedleaf crouched over Mousefur, and shook her head. It sent a wave of pain through her skull. "I'm fine. Other cats need her more."

Bluefur's eyes wandered. Thistlestar was stirring now, gazing around the camp with an unreadable expression. It was then that she noticed it- there was another cat lying motionless.

It slowly registered that he was in the spot Whitestorm had been fighting.

"No!" Bluefur raced to the tom's side. She placed her paw on his flank, trying to get a reaction. Whitestorm's normally snow-colored fur was stained red with blood; she could only hope that it was not his own.

"Whitestorm." He didn't respond, so Bluefur called his name louder. "Whitestorm." Still nothing. She tried to shake him, to wake him up, like she had with Snowfur all those seasons ago. "Whitestorm!" For the first time true fear crept into her voice. Her sister's son could not be dead.

She shook him again. He did not wake.

Bluefur raised her head to StarClan. "No!"

She had promised she would protect him.

She had promised Snowfur she would keep him safe.

The crowd parted to let Thistlestar through. A look of shock clouded his face when he saw his son's body. His stunned expression slowly contorted into fury.

Finally, Thistlestar looked up and broke the silence, his voice hoarse but powerful. "RiverClan think they have defeated us." He raised his head. "They are mistaken. I tell you now, ThunderClan, RiverClan will pay for their actions in their own blood. They will rue the day they killed my son."

Defeated and broken, the cats of ThunderClan murmured in silent agreement. Bluefur stared numbly at Whitestorm's body, barely aware of her kits pressing their fur against hers in a gesture of comfort. It didn't matter. Her sister's son, the kit she had promised to keep safe all those seasons ago, was dead.

No Place in This Forest

Time plodded on. There were more battles now, as ThunderClan struggled to keep its expanded territory while facing threats from all sides. Early new-leaf came and went- or at least what should have been newleaf; the cold of leaf-bare persisted for much too long.

Bluefur found herself checking her appearance in puddles sometimes, just to see how much more silver her muzzle had grown. She wondered if it was more due to stress or age.

There were no more evening patrols with Whitestorm. No more talks about the Clan's future with her sister's son. She tried to put Whitestorm's death in the back of her mind, burying it so deep that she couldn't think about it. About how she had let Snowfur down. About how Whitestorm's death had been a huge loss for ThunderClan. About how it was all her fault. She should have known the RiverClan cats were out for blood. She should have seen that the RiverClan warrior had been ready to kill. She should have known. If she had just fought the warrior instead of letting him go-

But she couldn't think about that.

There was a dearth of young cats now, with so few litters being born. Brindleface's kit had recently been named an apprentice, and to Bluefur's surprise, Stoneclaw had been chosen to be her mentor. Sandpaw and Stoneclaw got along well together, and whenever Bluefur saw her son instructing his young apprentice, she couldn't stop herself from feeling a warm glow of pride.

But every day Bluefur fought a pang of resentment. Too many had died. If only Robinwing and Willowpelt had survived to their kitting, ThunderClan would have at least had a few more apprentices. The Clan was in a precarious situation; Bluefur could feel it in her bones.

At least Goldenflower had given birth recently, but even that had been tainted with heartbreak; only one kit survived.

None of the younger cats said anything, but they had been disappointed. They were grief stricken by the loss of the kits just as much as their Clanmates, but on top of that they knew their chances for an apprentice of their own were slipping away.

They patrolled the ShadowClan border constantly. As well as regular dawn and dusk patrols, Thistlestar often stationed a group of cats to keep watch over the more fought over segments of the border during the night.

Tonight, Bluefur and Stoneclaw had been chosen, and as they made their way there, they were drawn into conversation.

"Sandpaw's training is going well," Stoneclaw meowed as he trotted along the path, tail held high.

"She seems keen to learn," Bluefur remarked.

"She is." Stoneclaw slowed to a stop, and then sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws. Sniffing the air, Bluefur joined him. There was no sign of ShadowClan tonight, and all was peaceful.

"You're doing a good job with her," Bluefur continued. "Giving you Sandpaw to mentor was one of Thistlestar's best decisions."

"And probably the only one you've agreed with," Stoneclaw replied, his eyes narrowed teasingly. Bluefur let out a purr of amusement.

They sat there for a long time, unmoving. No sign of any other cats came, and as Bluefur breathed in the air, she wished that things could go back to how they were when she was young. Raggedstar had died recently, and ShadowClan's leadership had been taken over by his son, Brokenstar. The younger cat had proven himself unpredictable- half a moon earlier he had launched an attack on Snakerocks of all places.

Bluefur could feel it in her pelt- the forest was shifting. She thought

back to her younger moons, recalling how she and Snowfur had played together as kits, how Sunstar had watched out for her when Moonflower died, how she had trained as an apprentice with Lionheart and Goldenflower and Rosetail and Sweetpaw. Back then there had always been a certainty that whatever challenges ThunderClan faced, it would survive. Cats died but new kits were born. Old leaders would fall and new ones would rise. But no matter what happened, ThunderClan, and the rest of the Clans, would go on. That certainty was gone now.

After a long time, Stoneclaw broke the silence. "Was it always like this?"

Bluefur regarded her son for a heartbeat, and then turned back to the ShadowClan border. "No. It wasn't."

The Twolegplace border was considered less important than the others; after all, only kittypets and individual rogues ever crossed into ThunderClan territory from there. Bluefur often walked here alone, past the fences and shrubbery common around Twoleg nests. It was nice to get away from the Clan every once in a while, and Twolegplace was the last place she had patrolled with Whitestorm. She guessed it would always remind her of him.

Sometimes she passed the nest of Pinestar's old kittypet friend, Jake. Now she was in the same general area, a few fox-lengths off from the boundary. A flash of ginger caught her eye, and when she looked up she thought she saw Jake again, sitting on the fence.

Shocked, Bluefur crouched low, hiding herself behind a clump of ferns. *It can't be,* she thought. Jake was much too old to still be alive.

She chanced a second look, and breathed out through her nose. This cat was not Jake, but a younger tom whose fur was the same color. She had seen him a few times before now; the tom was always staring out at the forest with a look of intense concentration.

Bluefur watched as the ginger tom leaned forward. His green eyes

narrowing, he bunched his muscles and leaped down the side of the fence. The tom glanced at his surroundings and took a deep breath, and Bluefur wondered if he'd ever walked among real plants that grew free from the influence of Twolegs. He then padded forward and began to make his way into the woods.

Bluefur trailed him silently. She would have to chase him off, but for some reason she was curious. As long as he did not get too far into ThunderClan territory she wouldn't claw him.

The scent of mouse hit her nose, and a moment later the tom's whiskers twitched; he had smelled it too.

The kittypet crouched down and began to creep up on it. There was a tiny jangling sound- Bluefur realized it was coming from the shiny thing hanging from his collar- and the tom froze. When he stepped forward again he was silent.

Peering around the side of a tree, Bluefur dug her claws into the ground, unsure as to why she was so intent on watching the kittypet hunt. True, she had seen him out of the corner of her eye a few times when walking near the Twolegplace, but that was no reason to allow this cat to catch a mouse on ThunderClan territory. Bluefur narrowed her eyes as the tom kept going. His crouch could use some work, but it was much better than she would have expected out of a cat that lived with Twolegs. In the end though, he hesitated a heartbeat too long when he got close and the mouse skittered away.

Bluefur shook her head to herself. What was she thinking? She had let this go on long enough. If this kittypet thought he was going to be able to hunt on ThunderClan territory without repercussions he was mistaken.

Tail bristling, Bluefur slipped into the clearing, and stalked, stiff-legged, into the kittypet's line of sight. "You shouldn't be here."

The tom stared at her in shock; he had obviously been completely unaware of her presence. She could only imagine the fear that must be flowing through his veins. For a Twoleg pet, it must be shocking to see an old, battle scarred warrior. But for some reason, the

kittypet made no move to run. He stayed, his gaze half-guarded, half-curious.

"What are you doing here, kittypet?"

As she drew closer, his eyes flicked back and forth. Although he was standing his ground now, he looked like he was considering running, and Bluefur tensed, ready to give chase. As harmless as this cat probably was, she could not make him think he could wander about the forest whenever he pleased.

"Are you going to answer me?" she hissed. "What are you doing on ThunderClan territory?" He reminded her of a Clan cat in spite of his obvious kittypet upbringing. There were not many kittypets who wouldn't flee when faced with fighting with a warrior.

Finally, he answered. "I'm sorry." The kittypet cautiously lowered his gaze. "I didn't mean to intrude. I've only come here to hunt for a mouse or two."

Bluefur felt anger spread through her pelt. How could she have been so stupid? This was a Twoleg pet, not a warrior. He had no idea of the ways of the forest. "A mouse or two?" she spat. "Do you not realize that by hunting here you take food from the mouths of my Clanmates?" The tom stared at his paws while she glared at him, tail bristling.

Slowly, the kittypet raised his head to meet Bluefur's eyes. "I am sorry," he meowed finally. "I did not realize this was your territory. I will not hunt here again." He did not shake, nor show any sign that he feared being attacked, even though the thought must have been at the front of his mind. Bluefur was impressed.

After a long moment, Bluefur sighed. "You are lucky you met me, and not some other cat," she meowed. "There are ThunderClan warriors who would give you serious injuries for your foolishness."

"ThunderClan?" The kittypet's green eyes were filled with unguarded curiosity. "Is that what you call yourselves?"

Bluefur gave a stiff nod.

The tom's ears were pricked. "How many cats are in ThunderClan?"

Bluefur pondered how to answer. "Few, but enough," she replied. Why was she talking to him?

"So you all live and hunt on the same territory?"

"What makes us ThunderClan is not our shared territory," Bluefur explained. "Every cat provides for the Clan in some way. It is my duty as a warrior to hunt and keep intruders off ThunderClan land."

The kittypet's eyes had flared with interest at Bluefur's mention of the word 'warrior.' "Are you all warriors then?"

There was a sudden rustling noise, the sound of distant crunching leaves, and Bluefur twisted her ears toward the bushes. There was a patrol on the way, and by the scent wafting in the breeze she could tell that Tigerclaw was in the lead. The fierce warrior wouldn't take kindly to a kittypet, and since he was deputy she would not be able to stop him from attacking this tom, just as he had attacked another kittypet all those seasons ago.

The ginger tom was still watching her curiously, oblivious of the danger he was in.

She leaned forward. "Listen closely, young kittypet," she hissed in his ear. "Leave, and never return. You have no place in this forest."

The ginger kittypet stared at her, his eyes wide. The rustling noise was getting closer.

"Go!" Bluefur spat. His ears twitched; he'd finally heard the other cats. With a final look, the tom shot off. His flame colored pelt flashed in the sunlight, flickering one last time before he ducked behind the trees and vanished into the shadows.

Less than a heartbeat after the tom was out of sight, the patrol appeared.

"I smell intruders," Tigerclaw growled, stepping out into the clearing. Darkstripe, Longtail, and Mousefur emerged from behind a tree a moment later.

Bluefur shook her head. "It was just one: only a kittypet straying across our borders." A snarl rumbling in his throat, Tigerclaw made to follow the ginger tom's scent trail. "That won't be necessary." Bluefur barred Tigerclaw's path with her tail. "I sent him on his way. He will never come back here."

Long Nights

Newleaf slowly turned to greenleaf. There had been little trespassing on ThunderClan's borders for a few days, and no Clan had made it deep into ThunderClan territory since the attack in which Whitestorm died. Few cats had fallen in battle recently, but the fighting was still fierce as ever and there were many close calls. Mousefur was sleeping in the medicine den as a result of ShadowClan's most recent border raid.

Is this a lull? Bluefur wondered. It was strange to her, and also a bit unnerving. Hostilities had been ramping up, cats were expecting a major battle, and then... nothing. Thistlestar had cut back on attacks on other Clans' camps, deciding to focus on border raids instead. There was still plenty of fighting, of course; Bluefur bent to lick a cut on her foreleg, the mark of a ShadowClan apprentice's teeth. She had sent the young tom off with a single, well-aimed claw swipe; she doubted he would have been so lucky if he had faced another warrior.

The camp was guarded every night by two warriors: one at the main entrance, while the other patrolled the camp boundary. Bluefur guessed that it was only a matter of time before RiverClan or ShadowClan attacked the camp again and Thistlestar wanted to be prepared. For now though, Bluefur reflected as she sat vigil by the gorse tunnel, all was quiet.

Then the sound of pawsteps hit Bluefur's ears. Stiffening, she whipped around.

She needn't have worried- it was Spottedleaf. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," the pretty medicine cat meowed.

"It's alright," Bluefur replied, letting her bristling fur falling flat. Noting the tortoiseshell's ruffled fur, she gave her a questioning glance. "Can't sleep?"

"Not as much lately." The pretty tortoiseshell softly padded up and

sat down. "How has it been?"

Bluefur flicked her tail. "Quiet night so far."

Spottedleaf nodded. "Many nights have been quiet recently. Perhaps ShadowClan and RiverClan have tired attacking us."

"Perhaps." Bluefur studied the medicine cat; the she-cat sat silently, her tail curled around her paws. She looked almost serene, and it made Bluefur hopeful. Even in such trying times every cat could count on Spottedleaf to remain calm and composed. "Has StarClan spoken to you?"

"Not recently." Spottedleaf raised her head and looked up at the stars. "I often search the skies for signs- but there are none. I do know one thing," she went on, meeting Bluefur's eyes. "There will be a war. I don't need a sign from StarClan to know that."

"What do you mean?" Bluefur asked, her fur prickling. She knew other cats were growing concerned, but she hadn't thought any cats aside from herself, much less the Clan's medicine cat, were predicting such a dark future for ThunderClan.

"Last leaf-fall was not the last time our camp will be invaded. Perhaps not right this moment, but ThunderClan is in danger. Many cats will be injured in the coming seasons." Shaking her head, Spottedleaf's amber eyes clouded with anxiety. "When that happens, I pray that I will be able to save them."

Bluefur watched her for a long moment. "You are a gifted medicine cat, Spottedleaf. You will find a way."

Tonight it was clear overhead, but dark gray clouds raced across the sky in the distance. A slow rumble of thunder echoed faintly.

Turning her head from her vigil, Bluefur caught sight of Rosetail; the ginger tailed she-cat had a warm look in her eyes.

"Night watch again?" Rosetail meowed.

Bluefur nodded, beckoning Rosetail to sit down with a wave of her tail.

"I'm glad you're up," Rosetail meowed. "I was hoping to speak to you before the ceremony."

"Ceremony?" Bluefur echoed.

Rosetail took a deep breath. "I've decided to retire."

Bluefur blinked in astonishment, unable to believe what she'd just heard. "What? You're not that old!"

Purring, Rosetail pressed against her. "Face it, Bluefur. We are both old. I do admit I could last a few moons longer as a warrior if I had to, but it's time."

"I didn't know your injury bothered you so much." Bluefur glanced down at the scar on Rosetail's leg. She had thought it had healed, but apparently it was still causing her trouble. Bluefur felt a prickle of guilt; she would never have insisted on such long patrols when Rosetail joined her if she had known.

"My leg has been hurting recently, but it's not just that." Rosetail sighed. "You're different from me, Bluefur. Being a warrior is your life- the hunting, the patrolling- it's like breathing to you. It was never like that for me."

Bluefur was stunned. How could Rosetail not like her warrior duties?

Rosetail seemed to catch on to Bluefur's trail of thought. "I love being a warrior, don't get me wrong, but it's not all there is to life," she went on. "It will be a burden off my shoulders to retire to the elders' den. I look forward to getting some rest after spending my life serving my Clan."

Bluefur stared at her friend, still in shock over the she-cat's decision. Finally, after a long moment, Bluefur rested her muzzle on Rosetail's head. "The Clan will be thankful."

"It will be fantastic. Instead of getting up for the dawn patrol I will

sleep in and get taken care of by the young cats." Rosetail twitched her ears. "I can't wait for you to join me."

"You're going to be waiting quite a few seasons," Bluefur warned her.

Rosetail purred. "That's true. I know you, Bluefur. You will have to be dragged kicking and yowling into the elders' den when your time comes."

"I sometimes get the feeling that Thistlestar wants to force me to retire to get me to stop complaining at senior warrior meetings."

"Thistlestar would never do that," Rosetail scoffed.

"I'm not so sure," Bluefur meowed, whiskers twitching in amusement. "The Clan wouldn't like it, but if he could get around the backlash..."

Purring, Rosetail shook her head. A flash of lightning lit up the distant sky, but the storm was so far away it took several heartbeats before the faint growl of thunder arrived.

A deep voice rumbled in Bluefur's ears. "Keeping watch again? This is the third time in the last quarter moon."

"Lionheart." Bluefur touched noses with the golden tabby tom. "I wasn't aware you were keeping track."

"I take it you didn't volunteer."

Bluefur shook her head. "Thistlestar keeps choosing me. I think his plan is to get me too tired to criticize his leadership decisions."

Letting out an amused purr, Lionheart limped over and settled himself next to Bluefur. The deep gash on his shoulder had healed long ago, though he carried a long scar that was devoid of fur. "Rosetail's retirement ceremony was well done."

"Yes, it was," Bluefur agreed. "Is she settling in?"

"Rosetail is a welcome addition to the elders' den, if a talkative one."

Bluefur purred. "She deserves it. She served the Clan well."

Letting out a tiny sigh, Lionheart shook his head. "I can hardly believe cats our age are starting to retire."

"Not quite. I'm older than Rosetail," Bluefur pointed out.

"By two moons." Lionheart purred, shaking out his fur. "It seems like yesterday we were apprentices training together, and look at us now. I'm an elder and you're a senior warrior."

Bluefur gave Lionheart a long glance. She had never gotten over the fact that he had joined the elders so young, and now he had reached the age when cats were retiring. "Do you miss being a warrior?"

Lionheart looked thoughtful for a long moment before he answered. "I think I will always miss it, even if I were to live long enough to become the oldest cat in the forest."

They sat in a companionable silence that was only broken by normal sounds of the night: chirping crickets, branches bending in gusts of breeze, the tiny pawsteps of distant prey animals. All was peaceful.

"You must be tired," Lionheart meowed abruptly. "And I know you have the dawn patrol tomorrow as well. I could keep watch for the rest of your shift."

"It's fine, Lionheart." Bluefur wondered if her fatigue was that obvious. "I couldn't ask you to do that."

"It's truly fine. I would like to do this," Lionheart meowed.

"Are you certain?" Bluefur twitched her ears. She knew Lionheart wasn't going to let up, and she *had* been looking forward to a chance to nap since moonhigh. In the off chance that enemies invaded, Lionheart was clearly alert and awake enough to give the Clan an advance warning.

"I may not be able to patrol or hunt, but I can still keep watch. My hearing is just fine, and I can raise an alarm as well as any cat." He nudged Bluefur affectionately. "Go on. Get some rest."

Bluefur allowed the tension she had been holding in her shoulders to fall away. She did need sleep, and everything Lionheart said was true. "Thank you," Bluefur mewed, brushing past him as she padded away.

The moon was rising once again when Bluefur thought she heard a noise. It was coming from within the camp, so she wasn't too concerned, and when she turned her head she was glad to see a familiar face.

"Hello, Frostfur," Bluefur greeted her.

"Hello, Bluefur." She arched her back in a long stretch. "I'm here for my shift."

"Wait just one moment. We hardly talk these days." Bluefur beckoned the white she-cat with a flick of her tail. "How is my former apprentice doing?"

Frostfur took a spot next to her. "Well enough," she meowed. "Brindleface and I got in some tree hunting today. We snuck up on a flock of pigeons- managed to catch almost a dozen."

"I saw those on the fresh-kill pile. That must have been some skilled hunting."

"Nothing like the old 'climb-and-sneak' technique." Frostfur narrowed her eyes mischievously.

Bluefur purred, recalling her time as Frostfur's mentor. "I remember teaching you that. You were a natural." She wasn't exaggerating; Frostfur truly was a skilled hunter, and she had to be to sneak up on prey in green-leaf with white fur.

"You trained me well." Frostfur twitched her ears.

They sat in silence. Bluefur swiveled her ears toward the forest, and as usual, all she could hear were tree branches swaying in the wind. She looked up; wispy clouds scudded across the sky, unaware of the turmoil in the forest below.

Quiet pawsteps approached, but Bluefur was unconcerned. It was Runningwind, the other warrior keeping watch tonight. The swift tabby came into view, twisting his ears and pausing every few steps to peer into the forest. When he reached her, Bluefur dipped her head. Runningwind nodded in return, and then went on to circle the camp once more.

It was quiet again when Frostfur turned. "Have you heard the news?"

Bluefur tilted her head, uncertain what Frostfur was getting at. Had she somehow missed a Clan meeting?

"Now that Rosetail is an elder she can devote her whole day to gossip," Frostfur explained. "She saw me speaking to Runningwind, Lionheart, and Darkstripe in passing yesterday."

"And?" Bluefur still didn't know where Frostfur could be going with this.

"Didn't Rosetail tell you? I am apparently asking toms to father a litter of kits."

Bluefur narrowed her eyes; from Frostfur's tone, she seemed a little too insistent that it was meaningless gossip. "I don't want to pry, but... are you?"

Frostfur was silent. She studied her paws for a long heartbeat, then raised her dark blue eyes to Bluefur's. "I considered it," she mewed quietly. "But now is not the time for kits."

Bluefur murmured agreement.

"I do know ThunderClan needs kits," Frostfur went on. "Brindleface was going to have a second litter too, but Redtail..." She trailed off, sighing. "What kind of forest would I be bringing them into? I can't raise a litter of kits if I have to worry if the camp will be attacked or

losing our territory to enemies. In a few seasons, hopefully the fighting will have died down. Then I'll have them."

"Sandpaw, you should be asleep."

The sky was clear tonight, and the nearly full moon covered the camp in a silver glow. The clearing had been empty... until Sandpaw had tried to slip out through the gorse tunnel.

"I'm going hunting," Sandpaw meowed. *Cats let her get away with too much,* Bluefur thought to herself; with so few young cats, Sandpaw was the kit of the Clan.

The young she-cat tried to squeeze around Bluefur, who held out her tail to stop her. "Did you tell one of the warriors where you were going?" she asked sternly.

"I'm telling you," Sandpaw meowed hopefully, tilting her head.

"And I am telling you no."

Sandpaw's face held a look of shock. "But I'll be hunting for the Clan-"

"The forest is much too dangerous for a lone apprentice at the moment," Bluefur replied. "You have only been training for a few moons."

Sandpaw's eyes flashed with outrage. "I'm not some useless kit- I can fight!"

"A whole patrol of enemy warriors?" Bluefur narrowed her eyes.

"As if a warrior could fight off a whole patrol either," Sandpaw muttered.

"Do you think I'm sitting vigil for the fun of it? RiverClan and ShadowClan might attack at any time." The pale ginger apprentice grumbled something under her breath, but Bluefur silenced her with a glare. "Sandpaw, you have yet to see battle, but if you had

you'd know many warriors have no reservations about attacking a young apprentice. Now, move along. Go back to your den."

"I'd have been fine," Sandpaw grumbled. "Besides, cats are saying there are less attacks on ThunderClan territory than last moon." Bluefur frowned; that was true, though not by much, and it was because Thistlestar had ordered raids on the other Clans, putting them on the defensive. Bluefur was thankful in a way; though she hated these needless fights, it kept the other Clans from thinking ThunderClan was weak. And if they believed ThunderClan to be weak, it would only be a small jump to attack the ThunderClan camp, which was left woefully underpopulated much of the time with cats having to patrol so often.

"It is only a matter of time before RiverClan or ShadowClan cross our borders again," Bluefur meowed.

"Then we should send more patrols and make them stay away," Sandpaw meowed. "I can't wait until I get picked to go on a border raid." Sandpaw pounced and began to swat at imaginary enemies. Bluefur blinked; she knew the time Thistlestar would begin sending Sandpaw into battle wasn't far off.

Sighing, Bluefur closed her eyes; in truth she wasn't that angry, just tired. She motioned with her tail for Sandpaw to sit down. "The answer to everything is not always to fight."

"Stoneclaw always says that." Taking a spot by the bramble covered entrance, Sandpaw wrinkled her nose. "But what else can we do?"

Bluefur wasn't sure what she could say. All Sandpaw knew was fighting; though the young she-cat had been to Gatherings she had never seen the Clan leaders speaking to each other in times of peace. She had only seen them threatening each other over territory.

"Everything," Bluefur meowed after a moment of thought. "Warriors only fight when they need to, and they only kill when there is no other way. If every cat ignored the warrior code, what would happen then? We would be nothing but rogues without it."

Bluefur shut her eyes, wishing with all her heart that Sandpaw could understand that the problems ThunderClan faced now were not caused by following the warrior code- if anything they were caused by not following it. While warriors were supposed to defend their Clan, they were not meant to invade other territories and kill cats from the other Clans.

"I suppose that makes sense," Sandpaw meowed with a shrug.

Bluefur watched the apprentice carefully. Perhaps not now, but one day she would truly get what Bluefur was trying to say. "Now, I do believe you were headed somewhere."

Sandpaw sighed. "Fine. I'll go back to my den." She began to trudge back into camp. "Good night."

"Good night, Sandpaw."

Bluefur turned back toward the forest. The moon was rising and the sky was clear, and she could only hope that ThunderClan's future turned out as bright as the stars above. Yet as much as she wanted to believe it, she couldn't help but think that day by day, moment by moment, the time to change ThunderClan's path was running out. Or perhaps it had already, and the time to save her Clan had passed... she just hadn't realized it yet.

Watching and Waiting

The night watches were getting tiresome at this point, Bluefur reflected as she trotted toward the camp. As much as she joked about it with Lionheart and Rosetail, with the amount of vigils she was being assigned she wondered if it truly was Thistlestar's plan to get her too exhausted to object to his decisions.

But for the first time in several days, she was not keeping watch, and would get a good night of sleep. Bluefur was looking forward to it. While cats who kept watch were reasonably expected to nap the next day, she couldn't help but think that Thistlestar was using it to make her look like she was lazing about the camp much of the time. Thankfully though, if that was his aim it hadn't worked. No cat ever objected to her napping- it was widely known that she had taken many night watch shifts recently.

Dusk was falling as Bluefur carried her cache- two rabbits, a squirrel, and a vole- into camp. She had hunted most of the day, and knew her Clanmates would be pleased by the amount of prey she had managed to bring home. On the way through the gorse tunnel, she nearly collided with a smaller cat, and skidded to a halt.

"Sandpaw," Bluefur meowed.

"Yes, Bluefur?" Bluefur narrowed her eyes at the young she-cat's innocent expression. "Fine." Tail drooping, Sandpaw began to trudge back to the apprentices' den, not even bothering to make an excuse.

Bluefur sighed. She really needed to have a word with Stoneclaw. Sandpaw hadn't tried to sneak out since Bluefur had confronted her, but that apparently was not going to stop her from going out without telling other cats during the evening.

She couldn't help but wonder whether Sandpaw would have been like this if she'd had denmates. Bluefur recalled Robinwing's and Willowpelt's deaths with a pang in her chest. If the two she-cats had

lived, Sandpaw would have *had* denmates. It must be boring being the only apprentice in the Clan, and part of Bluefur felt sorry for her. It was too late for another hunt, but perhaps... "Wait, Sandpaw." Dropping her cache on the fresh-kill pile, Bluefur padded over to the apprentice. "Has Stoneclaw decided on your lesson tomorrow?"

Sandpaw's ears perked up. "He's going to teach me the bird hunting crouch."

"Then let's get a head start. I'll show you."

Sandpaw looked up, shock apparent in her gleaming green eyes. "Really?"

"Don't make me change my mind and send you back to your den," Bluefur purred, amused by Sandpaw's surprise. The apprentice was looking at Bluefur as though she had grown wings; Bluefur knew she had a reputation of being the stern senior warrior amongst the younger cats. "Crouch down like this." Bluefur flattened herself to the ground and lowered her tail.

Twisting her ears, Sandpaw copied her.

"Keep your tail low," Bluefur instructed, waiting for Sandpaw to make the adjustment before continuing. "Now stalk forward like this." Keeping light on her paws, Bluefur trotted a few paces.

Sandpaw crept forward, her tail-tip twitching.

"A bit faster. Be sure to keep your tail low, but also use it for balance." Sandpaw quickened her stride. "Excellent. Start again over there."

Keeping her ears pricked for anything out of the ordinary, Bluefur watched as Sandpaw made a few laps around the small part of the clearing, giving the young she-cat tips here and there. It was Longtail's night to keep watch, and as the stars blinked to life he padded past the impromptu training session with a bewildered glance.

After a while Bluefur had seen enough. "Well done. Stoneclaw will

be pleased."

Sandpaw let out a mrrow of laughter. "He's going to be so confused when I get it on my first try."

"He is." Bluefur purred, imagining Stoneclaw's surprise. She might ask him how his apprentice's training went tomorrow to see his reaction. "Now, I've let you stay up late enough. It's time for you to go to sleep."

"Can't I practice more?" Sandpaw pleaded. "Just a few laps?"

Bluefur let a stern finality creep into her voice. "You will have plenty of time in the morning."

"Just once more?"

Bluefur jerked her head around, instantly alert. Thrumming pawsteps were coming from the camp entrance. She tensed and raised her head to let out an alarm call before she recognized the cat as one of her Clanmates who had taken the night patrol along the ShadowClan border.

Brindleface exploded into the camp, letting out an alarm cry so loud that Bluefur wouldn't have been surprised if it could be heard all the way to Snakerocks.

"ShadowClan are attacking!" Brindleface bounded through the camp, straight to the Highrock. "They're trying to take the territory by the Thunderpath back!" She paused to catch her breath. "Frostfur is injured. She needs help!"

Cats were beginning to make their way out of their dens at the commotion. Spottedleaf caught Bluefur's gaze as she slipped to the front of the crowd, and Bluefur remembered her ominous prediction of war. *Is this it?*

Tail bristling and head held high, Thistlestar emerged from his den and strode over to Brindleface. The cats gathered around the two, looking up at Thistlestar expectantly. "Stoneclaw, Mousefur, Darkstripe, Tigerclaw, join me!" Thistlestar made the announcement with practiced ease, and he began to lead the patrol out of camp.

"Wait, Frostfur needs a medicine cat!" Brindleface yowled. Bluefur had never seen the pale she-cat in such a panic.

"Fine. You." Thistlestar jerked his ears at Spottedleaf. "Come with us."

Spottedleaf took a step forward, defiance in her eyes. "You don't need to order me to heal my Clanmates; I would have come whether you'd told me to or not." She ducked back inside the medicine den and emerged with a bundle of herbs a heartbeat later. "Show me where."

Brindleface raced out of the camp, Spottedleaf close behind with the leaf wrap in her jaws. The battle patrol shot out of the camp right after them, leaving an eerie silence in their wake.

Bluefur felt a prickle of worry. This situation was relatively common by now, but that didn't mean any cat was used to it. Most of the Clan would stay up in silent vigil. Already Runningwind and Mistyfur had taken up spots near the gorse tunnel- they would be the first to see the returning patrol. Sandpaw crouched a few tail-lengths off; in this case, no cat would order her to her den for the night.

Bluefur's pelt prickled. She wouldn't be there to help this time, and like the rest of her Clanmates, all she could do was worry and wait.

"It's about time something happened." Lionheart, who had settled himself next to Bluefur, raised his nose.

Bluefur nodded. "We should have predicted this. Mosstail and Darkstripe scented ShadowClan over the border two days ago." She glanced around at her Clanmates. Runningwind was kneading his paws against the ground, while Dappletail and Rosetail were unusually quiet as they sat by the elders' den. "I just hope they return soon. Stoneclaw cut his paw pad on a thorn yesterday, and now he has to battle with an injury. I wish Thistlestar chose a different cat..."

"Stoneclaw will be fine," Lionheart meowed. "He has fought with injuries before- every cat has. Remember, he was my apprentice. He will know how to handle himself." Bluefur recognized that Lionheart knew as much as she did about how the battle would turn out, but she appreciated his words. He was reminding her that Stoneclaw wasn't a new warrior, he was an experienced fighter that had participated in many skirmishes before this one.

Bluefur purred her thanks. The camp was quiet for a long while, and she passed the time watching the moon inch along the cloudless sky.

The wait was agonizing. *Hopefully Frostfur is alright.* Bluefur winced at the thought of her former apprentice being injured. She hoped Spottedleaf had reached her by now.

"Do you hear that?" Longtail suddenly leaped to his paws. Runningwind jolted out of his reverie; he had been splitting a blade of grass with a claw.

"Are they back?" Sandpaw raced to the entrance hoping to greet her mother, Bluefur guessed, but Mistyfur stopped her with her tail.

Bluefur joined the rest of her Clanmates and stared at the gorse tunnel. The patrol *was* back... and was that blood? Stiffening in alarm, Bluefur took in what she was seeing. Cats began to enter the camp. Thistlestar came first, a few claw shaped scratches on his side, but otherwise no worse for wear; Frostfur hobbled in next, her side swathed in cobwebs as she leaned against Brindleface; then Tigerclaw, who turned his head to mew for his Clanmates to follow, revealing a small but deep gash in his muzzle; Mousefur and Darkstripe followed close behind him.

Where was Stoneclaw? Bluefur bristled, but her alarm lasted less than a heartbeat; Stoneclaw's blue-gray pelt appeared through the gaps in the brambles. He was clearly upright, but then she noticed that his head was low to the ground.

Bluefur's dismay returned as Stoneclaw entered the camp. Her son was dragging a cat.

No! The scene didn't seem real at first, it was too dreadful, too horrible. The cat Stoneclaw was carrying... was Spottedleaf.

Terrified wails spiraled up into the sky as Stoneclaw dragged the pretty tortoiseshell's body to the center of the camp.

"They've killed Spottedleaf!"

"How will we survive without a medicine cat?!"

"StarClan have mercy on us!"

Bounding up the side of the Highrock, Thistlestar raised his head. "Silence! All of you!" The caterwauling died down. "Spottedleaf should not have died. This is a terrible blow, but as always we will survive! We are ThunderClan!"

"StarClan must be angry with us to take our medicine cat away," Mosstail muttered.

"Are you saying that I've led you wrong?" Thistlestar snarled down at her. After Mosstail didn't answer, Thistlestar continued. "StarClan did not do this. The blame lies with ShadowClan; they are the ones who invaded and stole our territory!"

Bluefur reflected that ShadowClan had only tried to take back the territory ThunderClan had taken from them, but she kept silent. It *had* been against the warrior code for them to kill a medicine cat. This was a grave injustice; Spottedleaf had not deserved to die. Bluefur could not believe this was happening. She had spoken to the medicine cat only days before, and now she was dead. Angry murmurs spread out across the camp.

"Wait a moment... we lost the territory by the Thunderpath?" Longtail sounded stunned.

Tigerclaw snorted. "For now. Obviously, we will not allow ShadowClan to keep it." Bluefur's belly clenched. The ThunderClan medicine cat had just died; lost territory should not be a top priority.

Thistlestar's voice was a low growl. "Yes, Tigerclaw, we most

certainly will not take this lying down. In time, ShadowClan will regret it..." he trailed off, tail lashing, and began to pace at the top of the Highrock. "At the next Gathering, I will demand they return the territory they stole, and if they refuse, we will show them that ThunderClan is the greatest Clan in the forest, with or without a medicine cat!"

Yowls of support echoed through the clearing, although they were less enthusiastic than seasons past.

Defiance

Spottedleaf's death left a hole in the Clan that no other cat could fill. Who would heal them if they got sick or injured?

Even Tigerclaw seemed concerned. Bluefur overheard him talking to Thistlestar one day: "ShadowClan has the advantage in this fight; even if they've lost one medicine cat, they still have another."

Thistlestar dismissed his worries. "We are warriors. We can still defeat them in battle."

And battle they did. It was a common occurrence for a cat to raise an alarm call now, to inform their Clanmates of ShadowClan or RiverClan trespassing on large swaths of land. And as much as Thistlestar maintained that ThunderClan would be fine without a medicine cat, it didn't stop an undercurrent of fear from sweeping through the ThunderClan camp.

There were no serious injuries at first, but it soon became obvious that most cats had no idea what to do with herbs. Brindleface and Mosstail had taken to collecting familiar looking leaves and setting them out in front of the medicine den as they had seen Spottedleaf so many times, relying on vaguely remembered conversations with the former medicine cat in hopes that they would stumble upon the proper procedure for storing herbs and working out their identities. Most of their hard work ended up for naught- even if they determined what the herbs were, much of the supply rotted in the warm, humid greenleaf air.

As the moon went on, the sense of panic grew among the ThunderClan cats. Several elders fell ill, and despite cats' best efforts, their condition worsened with each passing day. The fighting with ShadowClan continued; there was a small skirmish by the Thunderpath, and a short few days later Longtail and Sandpaw developed infected wounds. Bluefur was hopeful that their youth would help them fight off the infection even if they couldn't receive the proper herbs, and thankfully, within a quarter moon they had

recovered enough to patrol again. But she knew every cat wouldn't be so lucky.

Frostfur's injury healed to the point that she could take on reduced warrior duties, but no cat was sure whether her choice in herbs worked or if it was just luck. Either way, her improvement did nothing to convince Thistlestar of the importance of having a cat well-trained in healing herbs, in spite of other cats growing sicker all around them.

It didn't take long for it to become obvious that Thistlestar was unwilling to enter into a negotiation. During a Clan meeting, Bluefur proposed asking another Clan's medicine cat for advice; perhaps ThunderClan could send a warrior to apprentice under them. Unsurprisingly, Thistlestar was having none of it.

"Send one of our warriors to another Clan?" he snarled after Bluefur suggested the idea. "Have you gone mad?"

Other cats had objections to her plan as well. "We haven't any warriors to spare if ShadowClan continues to attack," Longtail spoke up. "And surely no Clan would train an enemy warrior for nothing in return. They would have us exchange territory or prey-"

"Then that is what we must do." Bluefur's meow had carried through the clearing. Ultimately, while her protests had earned her sympathetic looks from some of the cats, no other warrior spoke up.

Several days later, Bluefur was about to head out on a hunting patrol when she noticed one of her kits near the medicine den. Mistyfur was examining a heap of herbs and leaves, her tail twitching in concentration. She was gingerly setting aside a few pieces when Thistlestar stalked up.

"You're wasting your time," Thistlestar growled.

Mistyfur continued sifting through the leaves as though she hadn't heard him. "Speckletail's paw is infected. I'm bringing her herbs."

Thistlestar lashed his tail. "Just put some cobwebs on it."

"Cobwebs will hardly do if she's coming down with a fever," Mistyfur replied curtly, lifting up a limp pile of stems. Speckletail was curled up in the shadow of the warriors' den, her swollen paw tucked close to his chest. *Speckletail is getting old,* Bluefur realized. She didn't usually think of the nursery queen as an elder, but seeing the halting rise and fall of her flank Bluefur could believe it. The pale tabby was long past the age many cats retired.

Mistyfur was still peering down at the herbs, frowning, as Thistlestar continued to watch her through narrowed eyes. He was clearly irritated at being ignored. Twitching her ears, Bluefur glanced around. Other cats were watching the exchange; Runningwind, Brindleface, and Mosstail were staring openly, while Stoneclaw sat a few tail-lengths off, his ears angled toward the Clan leader.

Thistlestar's voice was dangerously low. "Well, it will hardly help if you don't know the herbs." He jerked his chin toward Mistyfur's cache of leaves. "Do you even know what that is?"

Mistyfur leveled a defiant glare at Thistlestar. "Perhaps we could ask one of the other Clans' medicine cats."

Muffled stunned mews rose up. The gray tabby tom's head snapped toward Mistyfur. "We certainly will not. Some of our cats may be sick, but they are recovering. Asking the other Clans for help would be a waste of time."

Mistyfur stared at him. "Longtail and Sandpaw are well enough, but Speckletail is dying."

A thorn of emotion pierced Bluefur's chest; she was unsure if it was anxiety, fear, pride, or a mixture of the three. No cat but herself had ever challenged Thistlestar like this before.

Thistlestar loomed above Mistyfur, his spiky gray fur bristling. "Have you no loyalty? We are ThunderClan. We take care of ourselves, not rely on others who would slash our throats the moment we turn our backs."

"Rosetail is ill as well," Bluefur meowed, hoping to get a reaction

from the mention of Thistlestar's littermate, but he merely twisted an ear.

"Do you think I don't know that?" Thistlestar hissed. "She will be fine- she has been sick plenty of times before." It was then that Thistlestar must have noticed the group of gathered cats. Pelt rising, he whipped around to face them. "Return to your duties, all of you! Haven't you anything better to do than to loaf around the camp?!" The cats hastily scrambled away, and Thistlestar turned on his heel and stalked to his den.

"This is absurd. We can't go on like this." Mistyfur gave a tiny shake of her head, but didn't voice the thought Bluefur knew must be going through her mind. *We need a medicine cat.* Not taking her eyes off Thistlestar, Bluefur mewed her agreement.

To Bluefur's dismay, cats began to talk of kidnapping another Clan's medicine cat.

Most only supported the plan if they captured one from ShadowClan- after all, they were the ones responsible for the loss of Spottedleaf. A few, namely Darkstripe, thought they should kidnap the medicine cat from RiverClan or WindClan, since those Clans would least expect it and ThunderClan would have the highest chance of success.

One night a group of warriors settled together near the edge of the warriors' den. Bluefur lay a short distance off, trying to get some rest, but it was difficult with so many cats hanging about.

"We'll need to launch the attack soon," Darkstripe was meowing for the fifth time. Mousefur and Longtail were sharing tongues beside him, listening intently. "I'd say take one from ShadowClan, but any of them is fine by me."

"It would serve them right for murdering our medicine cat," Mousefur added darkly. Beside her, Longtail meowed his agreement.

"Right, exactly." Darkstripe nodded vigorously. "Thistlestar will have to change his mind soon, if cats keep getting infected wounds."

"Stop this foolish talk," Bluefur snapped. "We are not going to steal a medicine cat." The three warriors turned to face her. Mousefur flicked her ears guiltily, but Darkstripe glowered at her, his green eyes slits.

"Then what do *you* suggest?" Darkstripe shoved his muzzle in her face.

Bluefur had no response, or at least none that Darkstripe would accept.

"See, you have no answer," he sneered. "Thistlestar is right about you. You're a coward and a traitor!"

Before Bluefur could defend herself, Stoneclaw spoke up. "Think about it like this, Darkstripe." He sat up, ear twitching. "Medicine cats may not have fighting skills, but we can hardly expect one to allow us to calmly lead them from their camp. Are you ready to threaten a medicine cat and drag them screeching and yowling all the way from their territory to ours? And are you ready to keep them as ThunderClan's prisoner, because there is no doubt they'd try to escape?"

"We'd have to spare a cat from patrolling to guard them," Mosstail pointed out.

Frostfur added her mew to the din. "We won't have cats to spare at all if we do nothing."

"Enough of this." Bluefur quieted the warriors with a sharp glare. "There is no point in speaking of these things. Something like this is Thistlestar's decision to make." For once Bluefur was grateful for Thistlestar's stubbornness. He continued to insist that ThunderClan had no need for a medicine cat, though from what Bluefur could tell Tigerclaw was all in on a plan to capture a medicine cat. The deputy continued to try to sway the Clan leader, with limited success. *Thistlestar probably thinks it will make him look weak if he changes his mind,* she mused, turning her back on the younger

warriors.

Bluefur always objected to these plans. She was disturbed that so many cats would abandon the warrior code. However desperate ThunderClan was, they could not stoop so low. They could survive without stealing another Clan's medicine cat. How, she did not know, but not like this.

In the end, it hadn't mattered anyway. Discussions of kidnapping one of ShadowClan's medicine cats were quashed in one terrible instance when Thistlestar led a patrol that found an elderly ShadowClan cat deep in ThunderClan territory, several tree-lengths from the sandy hollow. The she-cat claimed to be a rogue, but Thistlestar was convinced she had been sent to spy. He killed her, and it was only later that Bluefur saw the body and pointed out that the 'rogue' was one of ShadowClan's medicine cats.

"You can't seriously believe that this starving cat was a threat." Bluefur's legs shook as she scrutinized the she-cat's broken body. The elder's matted gray pelt was smeared with blood, and though her fur was long and tangled it could not hide the outline of her ribs.

Thistlestar snorted. "You soft-hearted fool, this cat was obviously a spy. ThunderClan would have gained nothing by letting her live." He flicked his tail at Darkstripe; the dark warrior had kept watch over the area while patrols were sent to search for more intruders. "Bury this disgusting creature."

Dipping his head, Darkstripe grasped the skinny body and dragged it toward the hole he had prepared. When he was done piling soil into the grave he shook out his paws. "Ugh, I'll have to check myself for fleas tonight."

Bluefur was shaking now, but for a different reason. She was distantly familiar with this cat, and fairly certain that the elder was not a traitor to the warrior code. *Yellowfang,* Bluefur recalled. *Her name was Yellowfang.* True, Yellowfang could have been a spy- Bluefur could not know for certain- but after such a long life, she

deserved to be treated with respect. Not only hade Thistlestar killed the elder, but he had completely disregarded her burial ceremony.

As Bluefur followed Thistlestar and Darkstripe back to camp, the full weight of what had happened crashed down and her fury renewed itself once again. While Bluefur in no way condoned kidnapping a medicine cat, this ShadowClan cat might have been ThunderClan's only chance to gain one. Yellowfang might have been convinced to help ThunderClan since she had apparently been exiled, but there was no way that would happen now.

Bluefur hoped for the Gathering to come soon, but the moon expanded from a claw to an orb as slowly as it always did.

A Fateful Gathering

Finally, the night of the Gathering arrived.

Bluefur had high hopes for the night. Perhaps Thistlestar would put aside his penchant for fighting, now that it was so clear that ThunderClan could not afford a battle.

In the days before the Gathering, ultimately only Speckletail had succumbed to illness. Rosetail's fever had subsided, but as grateful as Bluefur was that her friend was well, Rosetail's recovery seemed to reassure Thistlestar that ThunderClan would be fine without a medicine cat.

The moon was rising slowly as Bluefur made her way to the Gathering place at the back of the patrol. Most of the Clan's warriors were present, and as Bluefur looked around, she realized that the patrol was *all* warriors. There were no elders, queens, or apprentices. Granted, most of the elders were ill and there was only one nursing queen and apprentice in the entire Clan, but Bluefur still found it strange. In her youth, there would have been a gaggle of young cats weaving in and out of the crowd, mewing excitedly about the Gathering. Now though, she could only see the stoic gazes of warriors.

The cats slowed as Fourtrees came into view. Bluefur, who had been deep in thought most of the evening, weaved her way through the group and sat closer to the front. At the very head of the cats were Thistlestar and Tigerclaw; they stared down at the clearing, their tails twitching.

Tigerclaw leaned toward the Clan leader. "Thistlestar, what will you say about ShadowClan killing Spottedleaf?"

"I was hoping one of you would ask. Listen, all of you." Thistlestar turned and faced the patrol, and the cats stared up at him, their eyes narrowed in the dim moonlight. "There is a reason I chose only warriors for this patrol, not elders or queens," he declared, sweeping

his gaze over the waiting ThunderClan cats. "Tonight, I plan to demand that ShadowClan give up the territory they stole." Murmurs spread through the group, some approving, others anxious.

"I don't doubt you will be able to convince them," Longtail spoke up, shuffling his paws awkwardly, "but ShadowClan cats have bees for brains. What if they refuse?"

"Then we will respond as expected." Thistlestar's gaze bored into the young warrior. "And that means all of you should be prepared if they say no. If ShadowClan wants a fight they'll get one." The meows redoubled in volume.

Bluefur leaped to her paws and shoved her way to the front of the group, unable to keep quiet any longer. "This is madness, Thistlestar! The full moon truce is sacred; we cannot break it for Clan rivalries."

"We cannot break it at a *Gathering*." Thistlestar's voice was a low hiss as he stared at Bluefur. "You fool, do you think I would order an attack on another Clan at Fourtrees?! No," he spat. "I will give the signal, and lead the takeover of the land by the Thunderpath once the Gathering is over. If ShadowClan insists on stealing from us, we will not back down. We will make them regret-"

"We have no need for that land," Bluefur meowed quietly. "We have no need for it, and we can't afford a battle without a medicine cat."

"You're thinking like a kittypet, Bluefur! ShadowClan would never give us the same respect. We've seen what they can do. They are the ones responsible for this! All these Clans, they put their own above others." Thistlestar swept his tail around, indicating the mass of gathered ShadowClan and RiverClan cats below. "Why should we be any different?"

Mumbled whispers sprang up, but when Bluefur raised her chin the cats went silent. "We cannot abandon the warrior code just because other Clans may not follow it."

Shocked mews hit her ears, and Bluefur knew why: she had just accused her Clan leader of breaking the warrior code.

"Silence!" Thistlestar's growl silenced the dissenting voices. "See, I thought you might have a problem with this, Bluefur. But you seem to have forgotten something: a Clan leader's word is law." He took a step forward, so that he and Bluefur stood nose to nose. "And because I am your leader, you will follow my orders. If I order you to stand down you will stand down. If I order you to attack you will attack. If I order you to catch me a pheasant and then line my nest with its feathers, you will do so. Is that understood?"

Bluefur's heart pounded in her chest as she stared down her enemy. She could not remember hating him more than she did in that single moment. "Yes, Thistlestar," she spat.

Thistlestar hurled one last glare at her for good measure. "Come, all of you," he growled, stalking to the edge of the ridge overlooking Fourtrees. The ThunderClan cats followed him. Tigerclaw watched Bluefur, his expression unreadable, before he slid through the crowd and retook his spot at Thistlestar's shoulder.

Bluefur's heart ached. She missed Whitestorm- of all cats, he might have been able to talk sense into Thistlestar, and Bluefur knew without a doubt Whitestorm would never have stood for his father pulling something like this.

The night she had been so hopeful for was on the brink of turning into a bloodbath. *I should have known better,* she thought, as Mosstail appeared at her side and gave her a sympathetic blink.

Thistlestar flicked his tail and the ThunderClan cats spilled down the slope.

There was one thing no cat had anticipated: the sheer size of the ShadowClan patrol. Bluefur gazed at the crowd in an attempt to count how many warriors were in the ShadowClan party, but cats were weaving around each other, roiling about like the many currents of the river. One thing was clear though. ThunderClan was sorely outnumbered, and WindClan hadn't even arrived yet.

Mosstail padded up, her tail raised questioningly.

"Let's move." Bluefur began to lead Mosstail through the crowd before the younger warrior could say anything. She could tell cats were trying to treat this Gathering like a normal one, but it was obvious that every cat knew something was amiss.

Mosstail nervously twitched her tail as they walked. "Is no cat going to talk about the badger in the den?" she hissed. "It's nearly time to start. Why are there no WindClan cats?"

"I don't know." Bluefur truly didn't know, but she could guess. WindClan was incapacitated and incapable of attending the Gathering. Patrols near Fourtrees had been light lately; it would have been easy to tell if something had been amiss before now if ThunderClan hadn't been so focused on defending Sunningrocks and patrolling the Thunderpath.

From atop the Great Rock, Thistlestar, Brokenstar, and Crookedstar's pelts gleamed silver. Thistlestar's eyes were narrowed, glinting like tiny flecks of flint. He had planned attacks on ShadowClan before, but what would he do now? Bluefur's pelt prickled. What if Thistlestar changed his mind and ordered an attack within the Gathering itself? The thought would have been absurd in Pinestar's or Sunstar's time, but Thistlestar was something else.

Brokenstar was meowing something to Crookedstar now; the RiverClan leader dipped his head meekly in response, and while Thistlestar's ears were swiveled toward their conversation he seemed to be purposely ignoring the two cats.

The moon had begun to fall when a yowl sounded, announcing the start of the Gathering.

"Welcome, cats of all Clans," called Brokenstar.

"All Clans?" a RiverClan apprentice muttered, before he was silenced by a sharp hiss from an elder.

"While WindClan may not be present, it is time for this Gathering to begin." Glaring, Brokenstar waited for the crowd to fall silent. "We have much to discuss," he went on. "For many moons, ShadowClan

has needed to cross ThunderClan territory to get to Fourtrees. This will not be accepted again."

Bluefur flinched inwardly when Thistlestar responded with a yowl: "Coward! Do you think you can avoid a fight after what you've done?" Thistlestar shoved past Brokenstar to the front of the rock. "Let us be clear: the territory by the Thunderpath belongs to ThunderClan!"

"I don't think I'm clear on that at all, I'm afraid," Brokenstar meowed. "The land you speak of has belonged to ShadowClan for generations before ThunderClan stole it."

Thistlestar bared his teeth. "That is ThunderClan land, and not only did you trespass upon it, you killed our medicine cat in cold blood!" A few RiverClan cats cried out in surprise.

"An unfortunate incident," Brokenstar replied smoothly, "but not one that could have been avoided on ShadowClan's part. If you had had the sense to not invade ShadowClan territory, it would never have happened-"

"Coward!" spat Thistlestar, falling into a crouch.

Puffing up his fur, Brokenstar backpedaled- not in retreat, Bluefur recognized, but in a calculated attempt to better position himself.

Although it was the height of greenleaf, Bluefur felt as though a leaf-bare wind had swept through her pelt. The ThunderClan patrol consisted of almost every ThunderClan warrior, yet there were many more cats present from ShadowClan alone. RiverClan's patrol was even larger. What would happen if Thistlestar challenged Brokenstar right then and there? Would RiverClan side with ShadowClan if the clearing broke out in fighting?

Bluefur tensed, feeling Mosstail's pelt prickling at her side, when Crookedstar stepped forward. "Brokenstar, surely there is other news you wish to share?" Thistlestar snorted as Brokenstar retook the front position of the Great Rock. Momentarily at least, the battle was averted.

"ShadowClan is thriving," Brokenstar meowed in a faux courteous mew that grated Bluefur's ears. "Unlike some Clans, we have many kits to feed." He looked pointedly at Thistlestar. It had been some moons since ThunderClan had announced the birth of a new litter. "We have several queens with kits now, and even more to come. Clearly, we are blessed by StarClan with so much new life, but new life means new mouths to feed."

"Indeed, new kits are a blessing." Crookedstar's mew conveyed no warmth; if anything, he sounded nervous. "But surely a Clan such as yours has many skilled hunters."

"The greatest hunters in the Clans can do little if there is nothing to hunt. There is not enough prey to go around, and if ShadowClan took no action, our kits would be doomed to starve."

Crookedstar looked extraordinarily tense.

"Where is WindClan?" one of the RiverClan warriors called out abruptly. *Finally.* Bluefur had been wondering how long it would take for the leaders to address the absence of one Clan.

"You ask about WindClan? WindClan is gone!" Brokenstar declared, turning back to the crowd. "ShadowClan needed to be fed, and we had no choice but to chase them out."

ThunderClan and RiverClan cats yowled in protest, but Bluefur noticed that while Thistlestar was bristling, Crookedstar was strangely quiet. The pale tabby shifted his paws uncomfortably.

"Such a helpless Clan was fated to meet its end sooner or later. This does not have to be so for RiverClan and ThunderClan." Brokenstar swept his gaze over the cats. "Let ShadowClan hunt on your territories, and you will be spared."

More yowls erupted from the clearing.

"Outrageous!" came the rasping voice of a RiverClan elder.

"Why do you need ThunderClan land, if you've got all of WindClan's territory to hunt?" yowled Mousefur.

"Silence!" yowled Brokenstar above the ruckus. "I am a leader and it is my right to address you here!" The clearing fell into an uneasy silence. "Now," he meowed, "cats of RiverClan and ThunderClan, you have a decision to make. Allow ShadowClan hunting rights on your territories or face WindClan's fate." Brokenstar turned expectantly to Crookedstar.

The large tabby faced the gathered cats. "I have agreed to allow ShadowClan hunting rights along the river." He bowed his head. "I believe this is best for RiverClan, and all Clans. Much blood has been spilt in recent times, there is no need to spill anymore."

Thistlestar had been silently glaring at the other leaders for so long that Bluefur was surprised when he spoke. "Then you will stop trespassing on Sunningrocks. After all, we don't want blood to be spilt! Or perhaps ThunderClan blood doesn't count!"

A flicker of defiance crossed Crookedstar's eyes. "Sunningrocks belongs to RiverClan."

Bluefur wished she could shut her ears. Thistlestar was going to start a fight with two Clans at the same time if he wasn't careful.

"Thistlestar, I make you the same offer," Brokenstar cut in.

The crowd fell silent, their attention tuned to the Great Rock. Mosstail shifted her paws anxiously as she stared up at the leaders.

For a long time, Thistlestar observed Brokenstar. "WindClan was weak," Thistlestar growled finally. "They always were."

"I'm glad you see that, Thistlestar."

Bluefur blinked. Thistlestar was *nodding*. Somehow, he approved this. It couldn't be. *Of all the times to cooperate with the other leaders he chooses now,* Bluefur thought in disbelief.

"*What is he doing?"* hissed Mosstail. Bluefur flicked her tail, silencing her. It had to be an act.

"Know then," Thistlestar hissed, "that ThunderClan is not." Brokenstar's smug expression slid of his muzzle.

Brokenstar growled something only the leaders could hear.

A snarl rumbled in Thistlestar's throat. Bluefur felt a chill in her spine. Provoking Brokenstar had been a terrible mistake; from the way the ShadowClan leader was gazing at Thistlestar, Bluefur was not sure who would attack first.

Blackfoot of ShadowClan was glaring at Tigerclaw, who with his bristling fur looked twice his normal size. Darkstripe stalked up and took a spot behind his former mentor, while other warriors turned on the cats they had been sharing tongues with moments prior. Bluefur was horrified to see that several RiverClan cats were sending hostile looks at both ShadowClan and ThunderClan; clearly RiverClan had not forgotten ThunderClan's many attacks on their territory.

She could see Thistlestar's claws glinting in the moonlight. He raised his chin.

This is it. Bluefur tensed, and she felt Mosstail stiffen beside her. Thistlestar was staring at Brokenstar, his bristling pelt making him appear like an irate gray fox. Any moment now, Thistlestar was going to give the order to attack. She bristled, waiting for the chaos to arrive...

When Thistlestar slowly sheathed his claws.

"This Gathering is over," he spat, and without a second glance at Brokenstar bounded down the Great Rock.

Ignoring the aggressive snarls from the other Clans, Bluefur rushed towards the Great Rock.

The ThunderClan cats had hurried to surround Thistlestar as soon as the Gathering was called to a close and were now quickly heading back to camp. "Are we going to attack?" Tigerclaw hissed.

"Not yet." Thistlestar lashed his tail against the brush. "The ShadowClan patrol is too big- Brokenstar probably brought along most of his cats to fend us off when we brought a normal sized

patrol."

Bluefur shook her head to herself. Brokenstar had most likely brought a normal patrol of cats, while Thistlestar had been the one to bring most of his Clan to keep the ThunderClan Gathering patrol large enough for the other Clans to not ask questions.

At least it had caused him to change his mind against the attack.

But somehow, some way, the Gathering had gone worse than she could have imagined. WindClan was gone. There was a cat who was a threat to the forest and had literally chased off a Clan, and it was reasonably likely that he would try it again. And worst of all, the one Clan they weren't fighting was gone.

Bluefur's ears jerked at Tigerclaw's growl. "Hopefully Brokenstar got the message. I do wonder though, what did you say to him when he was mewing earlier?" the dark tabby warrior asked.

"I told him that if he starts something he'll regret it," Thistlestar meowed.

Scowling, Bluefur twitched her ears. Why was she not surprised that Thistlestar would purposely antagonize an enemy?

"Are you not at all concerned that a Clan is missing?" meowed Bluefur incredulously.

Thistlestar scoffed. "WindClan was hardly a Clan anyway, what with them avoiding battle like frightened squirrels. Brokenstar was right about one thing; their weakness would have infected the other Clans too. We're better off without those mangy rabbit hunters. Besides," he went on, "this way ShadowClan will be tempted to attack RiverClan, and then both Clans will be weakened."

"That's hardly a certainty," Bluefur meowed. *Especially since you declared war on Brokenstar.* "Perhaps they will form an alliance and attack us together."

"Then we will fight them off!" growled Thistlestar. "ShadowClan and RiverClan may have more warriors, but ThunderClan warriors are the strongest! If Brokenstar thinks ThunderClan territory will be

easy pickings, we'll make sure ShadowClan ends up in the same state as WindClan!"

Bluefur was speechless. Had Thistlestar lost his mind? Even ignoring the fact that it would violate every tenet of the warrior code, ThunderClan was hardly in a position to win a battle against ShadowClan, much less drive them from the forest!

Numbly, she left the discussion to the other senior warriors and fell back to walk alongside her kits. She felt cold spreading through her paws.

Bluefur hated that she was powerless to change the situation; she wasn't Clan leader, Thistlestar was. If she had been leader she couldn't imagine sitting and provoking every cat outside her Clan while a tyrant gloated about taking over another Clan's territory.

But then again, she would never have planned an attack for the night of a Gathering or consider driving off another Clan. In Thistlestar's mind he probably was rationalizing that his lack of response would help ThunderClan.

Bluefur's fur prickled as Stoneclaw fell into step beside her. "It's never been like this before, has it?" he meowed.

"No."

Stoneclaw sighed. "It might turn out alright." He paused to leap over a fallen log. "It's true, driving a Clan from its territory is a terrible thing-"

"Terrible thing? This goes beyond that; it's unheard of." Bluefur made no effort to flatten her bristling fur. How could Thistlestar say nothing, and even nod his approval at a Clan blatantly breaking the warrior code? Certainly, she knew now it had been an act, but that almost made it worse. Thistlestar's hopelessly inept posturing had nearly caused the Gathering to devolve into battle. "Stoneclaw, no Clan has ever been driven from its territory before. If ShadowClan knows it can get away with driving off a Clan with impunity, there is nothing to stop them from doing it again." She shook her head to herself; she had not meant to snap at her son.

Did Thistlestar not realize that ThunderClan would be next, not RiverClan? Bluefur glanced at the tabby leader as he loped next to Tigerclaw. He did know, Bluefur guessed, and he probably planned to fight them off if they did try to drive off ThunderClan. How he expected to do that with so few warriors only StarClan knew.

Perhaps Thistlestar would try to make an alliance with Brokenstar. Or maybe his plan was to give ShadowClan a false sense of security before attacking- Bluefur thought that was the most likely option. And if Thistlestar ultimately did lead a direct attack on ShadowClan... Bluefur shivered at the thought. There was no way ThunderClan would get out of that without losses.